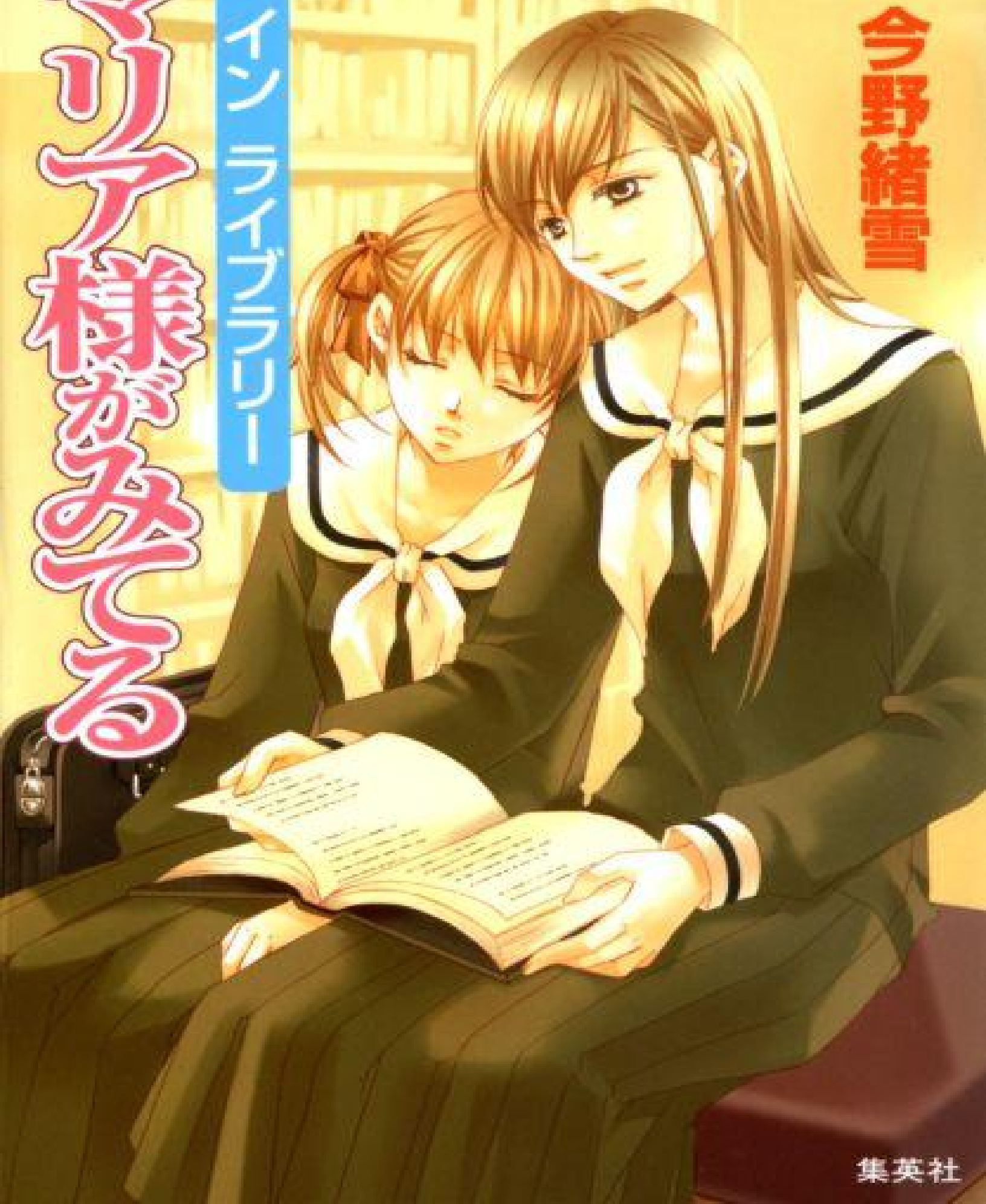


COBALT-SERIES

今野緒雪

インライブラリー

マリア様がみてる



集英社

Maria-sama ga Miteru

Volume 19

Written by:

Oyuki Konno

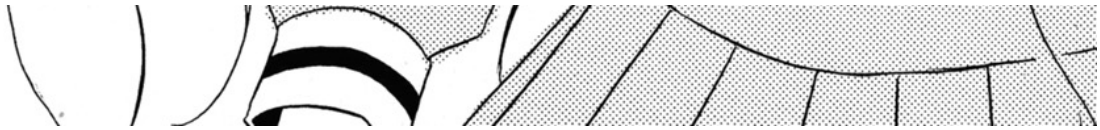
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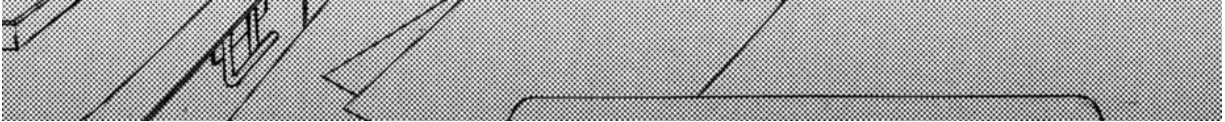
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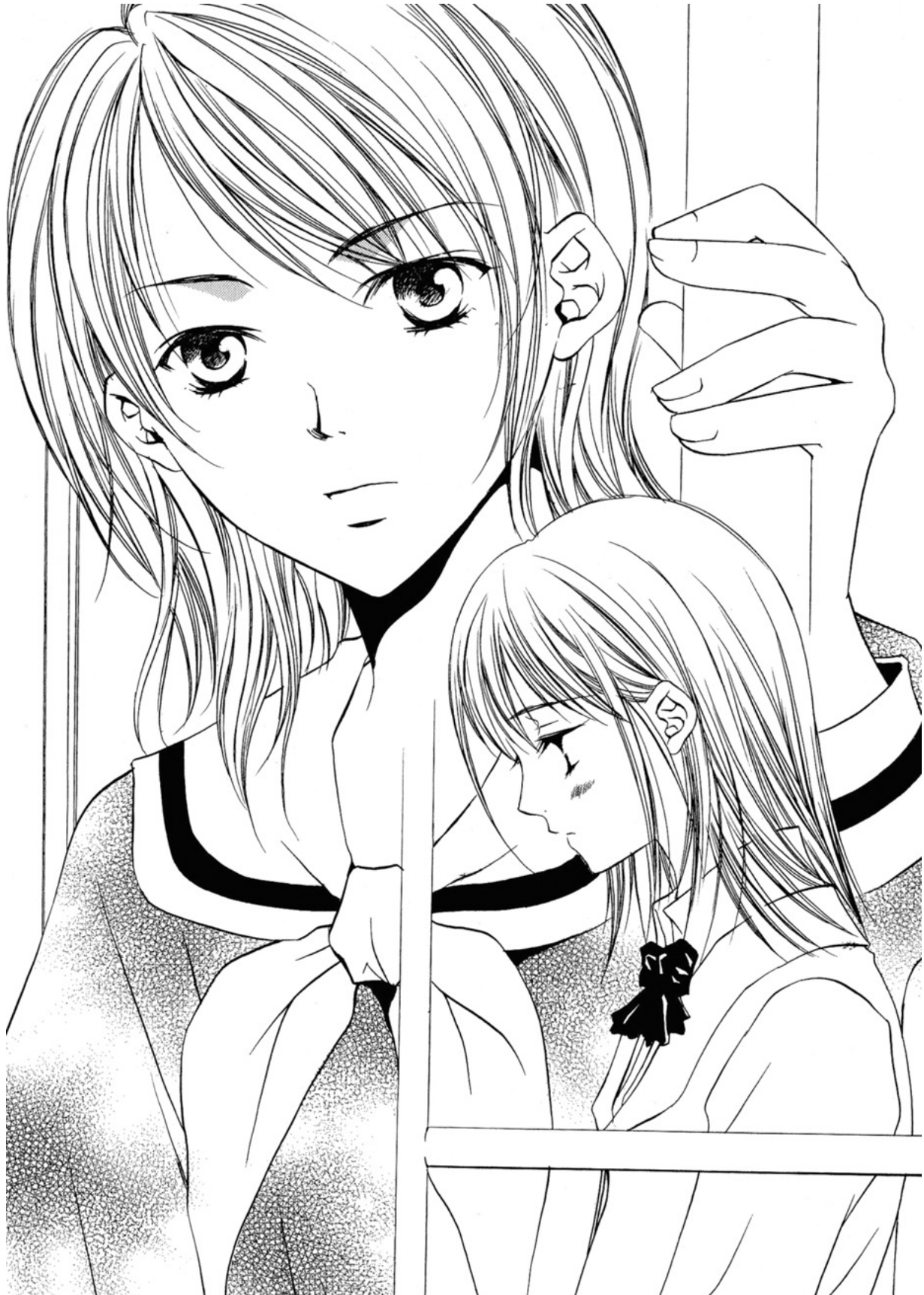
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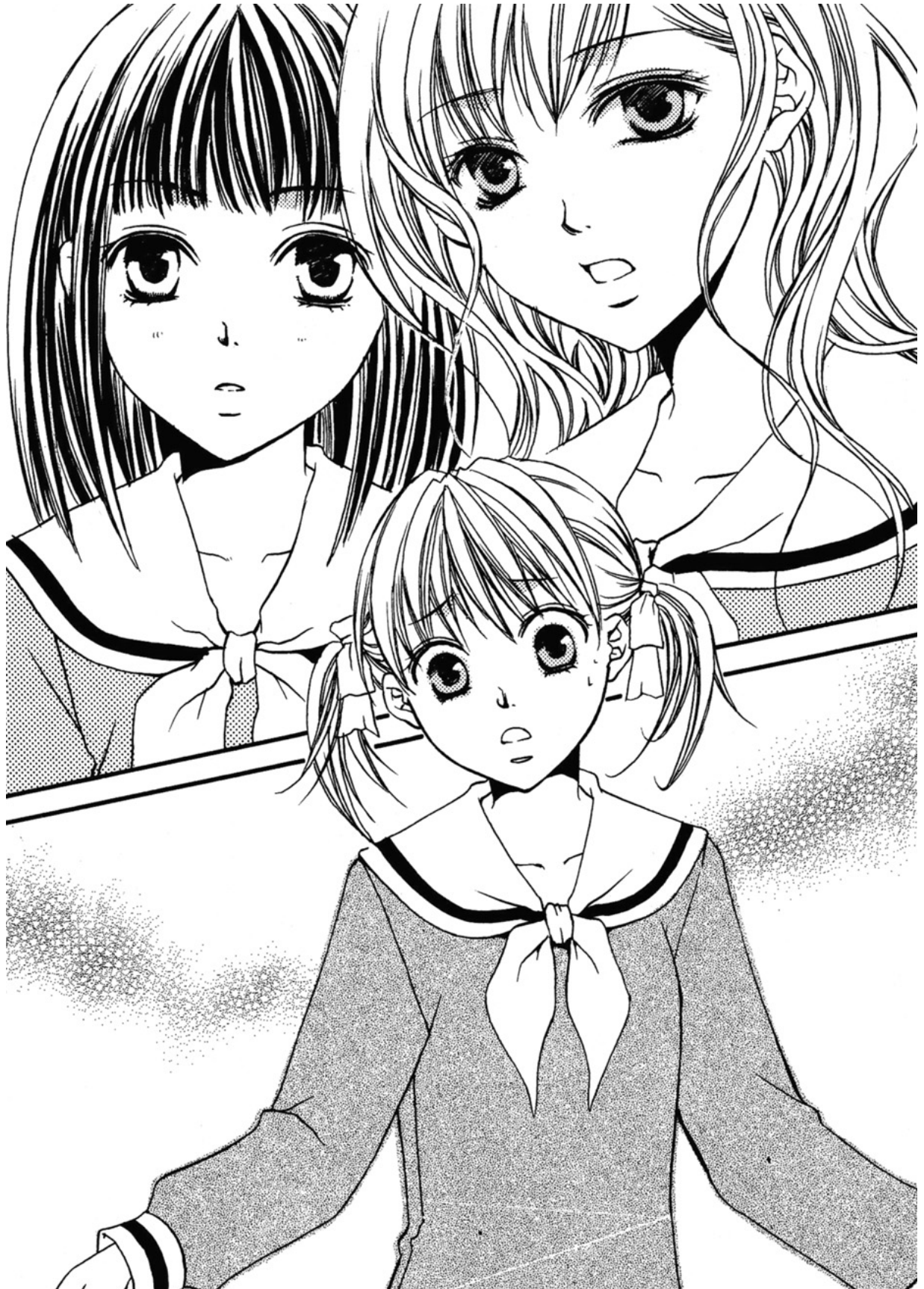






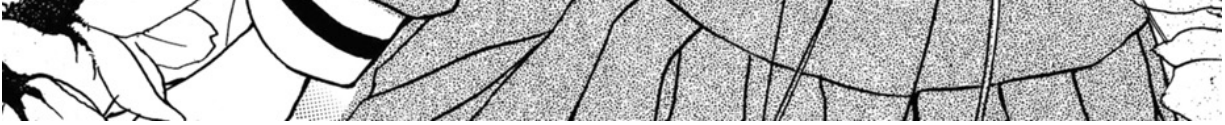


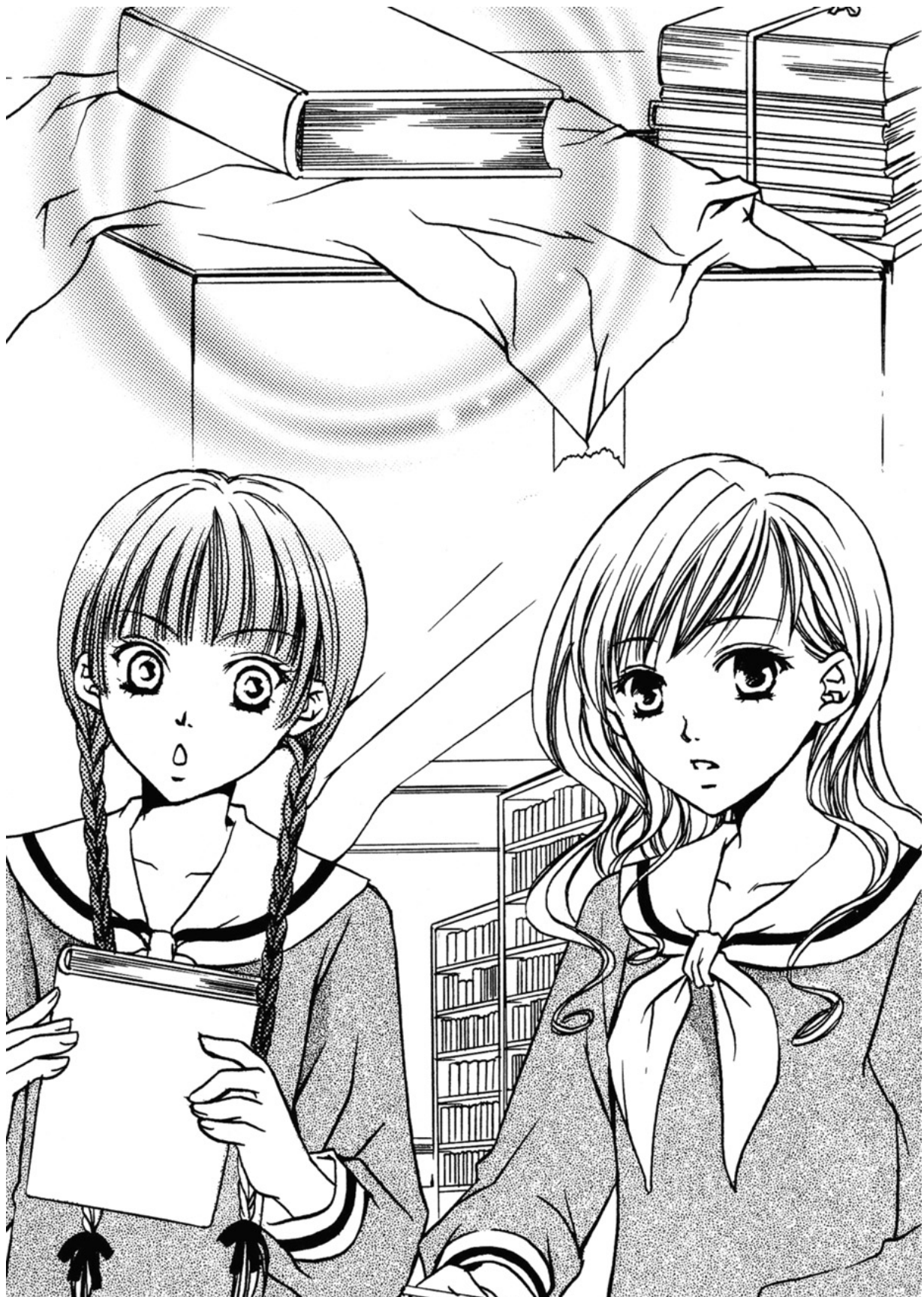














Illustrations

These are illustrations that were included in volume 19.

Prologue

“Good day.”

“Good day.”

Cheerful morning greetings echo through the clear blue sky. Today they once again pass under the tall gates into Maria-sama’s garden where maidens assemble with their pure smiles like angels.

Their bodies, which know no stain, are wrapped in dark-colored uniforms.

The pleats of their skirts should not be disarranged, nor should their white sailor collars flutter; here walking slowly is preferred. Of course, here there are no shameless students that would run to make it before the very last moment.

This is Lillian Girls’ Private School.

Established in the 34th year of the Meiji period, it is said that this academy was founded for the sake of the daughters of the nobility, a traditional Catholic girls’ school.

It is located within the Tokyo Metropolitan area. Even now, much of the original greenery of Musashino remains as, watched over by God from kindergarten to university, this garden undertakes to complete the education of these maidens.

Times change, and from the Meiji Period three times a new era has begun, until the present day Heisei, but for eighteen years, pure young women pass through here for a sheltered upbringing and education in culture. It is a valuable education, but something just as precious is left behind in that school.

In Library I

It was after school on Tuesday, two days after the school festival was over.

Because it had not been convenient at the time, Yoshino-san, Shimako-san and Noriko-san had taken the items used for the play from the gymnasium to the room on the first floor of the Rose Mansion where, after everything had been replaced and cleaned up, Yumi was assaulted with sleepiness.

“Yumi-san?”

As she continued to climb the stairs to the second floor, her gait slowed. Shimako-san, who was walking in front of her noticed, turned and spoke over her shoulder.

“Is something the matter?”

“Nothing, just that I suddenly became sleepy.”

“Are you not feeling well?” Shimako-san put her hand on Yumi’s forehead, muttering, “normal temperature.”

“Like I said, I’m just sleepy.” Yumi yawned “Fwaaaah.”

“Just a little. Didn’t you get enough rest yesterday?” Yoshino-san, coming up the stairs, entered the conversation.

Yesterday was a normal non-national holiday Monday, but since Sunday had been the Lillian school festival, there had been a compensatory holiday.

“Compensatory holiday for what,” Yoshino-san would argue, but in truth, she had spent that compensatory rest day out playing with Rei-sama, Yumi knew. They had gone to the movies in the afternoon, where it had been mostly empty and very comfortable, she had boasted this morning.

“The rest of the family did normal activities, so you couldn’t sleep late, huh.”

Shimako-san followed up, guessing that Yumi was the type to sleep anxiously. Moreover, that in the Fukuzawa family this was forgiven as the sleeping tradition.

“...More like, I never managed to sleep at all. I napped at noon, so when it came to night, I was awake. It’s a little like jet lag.”

Then Yoshino-san promptly filled in the word. “You were doing a one-person review of the school festival in your futon, weren’t you? Yumi-san is the type to worry over things later, huh. Like, it would have been good if that happened, it would have been good if this had happened.”

“...Not really.”

No, it wasn’t possible to express it, but it was painful. It wasn’t quite a one-person review instead, when she lay down to sleep, many things advanced on the inside of her head, and sleep became truly distant.

“Seriously, we can’t have you still exhausted from the school festival.” Noriko-san said as she climbed the stairs, and turning, gave Yumi a push from behind with a “here we go.”

“Well. Thanks.”

“Jus a little pick me up, you know?”

“Just a little?”

This was sheer bliss. Ah, is there anything comparable to Lillian, I wonder. But she was not yet ready to call it Heaven.

“Lead actress, well done.” How sweet they are, the first-years. How nice that Shimako-san took her petit soeur so early on.

(...Huh?) That was bad. Something, that—.

“I say, Yumi-san.” Shimako-san muttered. “Onee-sama pointed it out, but your face really does change.”

“Eh?” Was she showing many of her “hundred faces”?

“When Noriko pushed on your back, you must have remembered something unpleasant.”

“Why?”

“You just looked out of sorts, for a moment your expression clouded over.”

“...Not really.” No, it wasn’t possible to express. Best friends are not to be made light of.

As they entered the second floor room, they were wrapped in a warm pleasant scent.

“Ah, good work.”

“Since I thought you’d be back soon, we prepared the tea.” Rei-sama and Sachiko-sama turned towards the four with bright smiles.

“Rosa Chinensis made the tea, Rosa Foetida is the waiter!” Noriko-chan cried joyfully. This was rose hip tea, if you continued along with the idea, it was true. Of course, there were no roses in the sweets.

“About the tea, of course we can make it. We were first-years too, you know.” Rei-sama smiled, and gestured at Sachiko-sama with a “right?”

“That’s correct. Understanding our Onee-sama’s favorite flavors, remembering their cup. It’s inevitable to think of it, even now.”

“What, I don’t believe you. Because I’ve always seen Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Foetida as upperclassmen.” And Noriko-chan sighed. Really, when Yumi had also looked at the sempai, she had not been able to believe that they had ever been the same year as her.

“But Noriko-chan already has the presence of an upperclassman, doesn’t she.” Rei-sama said.

“Eh, don’t be absurd.” Noriko-chan waved both hands in surprised denial.

“Indeed. My soeur is still childish.”

“That goes for my soeur as well.” Sachiko-sama sighed. At any rate, both Red and Yellow Rosas said this looking directly at their cute soeur. Well, no, because they were standing to one side as they spoke.

“Those two won’t be spontaneously taking petit soeur for us. ...Ah.”

Shimako-san seemed to become interested halfway, to stick up for her two friends who were being singled out as victims, even though there was no real way to follow up.

“It’s impossible. Especially my Yoshino. Although a positive report is eagerly awaited, there’s been no indication that she’s initiated a search. At this rate, I won’t see a grandchild by the time I graduate.”

Rei-sama, who didn’t know about Yoshino-san’s promise to Eriko-sama, cackled.

The cutoff day was one short month away. Yoshino-san, who hated to lose, when she used her latent strength to get a soeur, what on earth would become of Rei-sama and her little sister—.

Although it concerned other people, she said, with concern, “In that area, Yumi-chan is okay. She has two possible contenders and is popular with the first-years. Soon we’ll become a little worried, but.”

“Yes, what shall we do?”

What shall we do, indeed, Sachiko-sama. Throwing it out so lightly. “Take a soeur,” she said, putting on the pressure, so which of us is it that has to do anything?

“Speaking of potential candidates. Those two haven’t come here since the school festival ended.” Rei-sama looked at Noriko-chan as she spoke. Because those so-called “potential candidates” and “those two,” Matsudaira Touko-chan and Hosokawa Kanako-chan, were her classmates.

“How are they?”

“How are.... They both seem to be busy somehow.”

“Busy?”

“Yes. So, some time ago, Yumi-sama came by to see them, but they weren’t in the classroom. Touko-chan had her club activities and Kanako-chan is doing something or other.”

Yoshino-san waited until Noriko-chan’s final word, then inquired, keen interest written all over her face. “Yumi-san, what did you go to the first-year Tsubaki class for?”

“Nothing. To thank them, and see their faces, that’s all.”

“Hmmm. Which one of their faces?”

“Which one, you say. Well...both.” If she had said that she just wanted to thank them again, after giving them both a mechanical pencil for their assistance, it would have been a deception.

Incidentally, however, if she had met with Kanako-chan she was going to decide when they would take the promised two-shot photo. In that case, she might want involve second-year Pine Class Tsutako-san to take the photo for Kanako’s special request, she guessed.

But, to add one thing to another, Yoshino-san’s question about “which” persisted, even though she herself fell silent. For sure, everyone was wondering which, Kanako-chan or Touko-chan, she would become her soeur. Yumi never designated either one, because she didn’t remember either one announcing her candidacy.

Maybe, there was a precedent, though. Before being taken by Shimako-san as her soeur, Noriko-chan had been in and out of the Rose Mansion. Last year, it was the same for Shimako-san.

Precedent. Precedent. Precedent.

Generation after generation, the soeur of Rosa Chinensis had been called Rosa Chinensis en bouton, and when she took a soeur she was called Rosa

Chinensis en bouton petite soeur.

Not just Yoshino-san, it would be bad if she didn't seriously consider it, and soon, Yumi thought. She wasn't limited to Kanako-chan or Touko-chan, nor should she lightly discount them, either—. But, what would be the right thing to do? Even if she thought back on the sequence of events when she became a soeur, Yumi couldn't use it as a complete reference.

(Maybe, right now the door will open into the room with vigor and one of the first years will be standing there, and I'll bump up against fate...like that would ever happen.)

No, no.

(Then, in front of Maria-sama in the tree-lined lane, I'll fix a first year's tie?)

... ..

(However, which one?) Yumi fell prostrate onto the desk. That was the biggest problem.

She could look for a soeur within the many first-year students, couldn't she? But it was okay if she was already attached to the easy mark.

(That's right.)

Even if she found a first-year that suited her, she might be rejected if she made overtures. Or she might already have an onee-sama.

And among those who are free, there may be ones who reject her because they would prefer to pass their time unpaired.

Like Kanina Shizuka-sama.

The scent of rose hip tea drifted about the room, carrying with it the name of that nostalgic person.

Rosa Canina.

Silent Night's Vision

The illusion of a match's flame.

That was probably a present of God's compassion to the girl who was about to leave this world.

What she wished for, what she desired, she hadn't been able to gain possession of, until the very end, that little match girl.

—Her beloved grandmother.

The next morning, on the face of that frozen girl was a smile.

Therefore, to have something called something a dream or a vision is very good. No matter how other people saw it, that girl certainly had gained possession of it.

I wondered what she saw in that flame.

Speaking of the moment of not being in the world, what would be necessary for me to be able to smile at that time?

It was an extremely cold day.

It was not snowing.

In the area where the dark road began, there was a girl wearing a hat, walking alone. However, she was not freezing. If you ask why, it wasn't just the hat, it was also the uniform, the coat, the shoes and the muffler that she wore. She was not the little match girl.

(Just kidding.)

It was quiet as she walked, she thought, probably because it would snow soon. A cold, wintry wind rustled the dry leaves on the trees, blowing into her marrow, a small hangnail in her mind, rubbing her the wrong way.

Even if it made it colder comparatively, it would be better if it snowed. The lack of sound could continue, the cloud of snow would dance around her then embrace her quietly.

“Snow.”

Her eyes stopped by chance on fir trees that stood in front of a boutique, where stuck on the needle-like leaves was a little cotton padding. Next to one another were little leather boots and stars. A neon sign in the shape of a candle flickered on and off.

It was a so-called Christmas tree. Today was Christmas Eve.

Jingle bell, pure night, red-nosed reindeer. Throughout the town, a mixture of Christmas songs flowed from the stores, gross slush, like mixed juice.

Shizuka was drawn to the fashion building, like a moth to an insect zapper. Somehow, she found herself going up to the fifth floor where there was a book corner, although there was no special book drawing her in when, as she rode the escalator, she heard the voice.

“Ojou-san.”

Because at the beginning, she did not think it was meant for her, she did not stop. However.

“Yes, you. You, the girl with the Lillian Girl’s School coat and long hair.”

Looking around the confines of the space, there didn’t seem to be any other Lillian coat-wearing girls with long hair other than herself that the person could be calling out to.

“Me?”

The direction the voice had come from was a fortune-telling booth, where the fortuneteller within was waving her over. A woman, roughly in her 30s.

“If you’d like, I can take a look.”

“No, that’s fine.” As she cut off and made to pass by, the black woman grinned.

“You won’t be interrupting. The last customer just left.”

“...” Just, she said. Shizuka smiled bitterly. From time to time she came to this building but, she had never seen this fortune-telling corner in this row before. There were three booths, usually with admirable business. Of course, she didn’t know who usually were there, maybe when she wasn’t there, business was good.

That’s fine, she refused, and was going to pass by, on the other hand, right now there was an empty seat that was being offered to her, so she sat and the fortuneteller regarded her with approval.

“Last year was a turning point.”

“Hehh...”

She was a little surprised.

The fortuneteller had said that without even taking Shizuka’s arm but even so, it was more or less a hit. However, was it a shot in the dark or a fluke? For just about anyone, a turning point would come every few years.

“Because of that, something good will happen.”

“Something good?” Shizuka snorted. Something good, she says? What kind of tangible is that?

“So you’re saying that my father will win the lottery.” She perfunctorily said “Thank you for the consultation,” got up and left. However good a fortuneteller she was, it wasn’t her nature to listen to any of it.

(Because, really, something good has no reason to happen in the near future.) So she thought as she ran down the escalator, but midway on the second floor, she rethought it, “No.”

The fortuneteller could have been talking about her turning point next year, when she spoke. Perhaps next year, if one looked at it objectively, could be seen as “something good.” But, even if she had not recognized its significance, that could totally have been the meaning.

At least, right now she had no desires for next year. Visiting somewhere far away could be called a “turning point” since her life would change if she thought about it, but it didn’t hold any uplifting feeling.

Why did that cut through her and cool her brain, though? As if in proportion to the rising excitement bubbling up in the town, she herself found her own energy lowering. Although the building was overflowing with people, she was isolated.

She wasn’t cold. However, there was no point at which she shared the feelings of any of these people going back and forth, just like the little match girl. In the area of the first floor exit, there was a slight reduction in the space of the usual sundry items for sale, where Christmas cakes were being promoted and sold.

“Time sale from 5 o’clock! Right now, ten percent off or more on all champagne and scented candles.” The sales clerk raised his voice to say that from 6 o’clock things were 20% off.

There was no time limit on the Christmas cakes. Selling all this mountain of piled up cakes by the time the store closed seemed a Herculean task.

“How is the chicken? It’s hot-hot!” She moved away from a woman wearing a plain red miniskirt who was holding out a toothpick stuck into a piece of fried chicken.

That was not what she wanted.

That was not the thing that would warm her heart.

Shizuka bought some matches and left the building.

When she arrived home, her mother was not there.

Both foyer and hallway were lit, so she must have gone out just before. Above the shoe box next to a flower vase, she had left a note that said, "Gone to pick up the cake I ordered."

Memo in one hand she looked into the kitchen, where in the oven a chicken was being broiled. In the refrigerator a bowl of salad keeping cool.

With the check on the dishes for dinner complete, and time left before the chicken had to come out, the timer on the rice cooker that her mother had set went off.

Grilled chicken, crab and fruit salad and the staple white rice; that was the typical Japanese Christmas.

Entering the living room, she took out her report card from her bag and laid it on the sideboard with the memo from her mother. Then her eyes fell on the container of sweets, from which she plucked a chocolate bonbon, then threw her body onto the sofa with a thud.

After she was seated, she noticed that the light was over by the air conditioner and she had no intention of getting up specifically for the purpose of turning it on.

Light leaked in from the hallway from the neighbor's garden where they had turned their house into a grand illumination, so she sat in the atmosphere of the vague light.

It wasn't so much that she was tired. It was just that now she was seated, she didn't feel like getting up. Until her mother returned, she wanted to just lie around, she decided, as she unwrapped the silver paper off a chocolate bonbon and threw it into her mouth.

"Hmm?" When she had thrown herself down on the sofa, something was tight against her thigh, Searching in her pocket, she pulled something out of

it, that she had forgotten that she had purchased previously, wrapped in a 100 yen shop tape, the box of matches.

“6 little packs for 100 yen, huh?”

She didn’t know if that was a good price or if it was cheap. She had never bought anything like matches until now. Why had she wanted this thing at all, really? She held it up in the dim light. Maybe, it was that. Coming to a realization, she quickly reached for it.

Shizuka had, for the two weeks previous, reread fairy tales for the school library end of the year newsletter article on “Books to Read in Winter.” Thinking about it, that was probably it.

“A Christmas Carol,” “Snow Queen,” “Dog of Flanders”.... And in there, “The Little Match Girl.”

It had been so long since she had read “The Little Match Girl,” so it had surprised her that her thoughts on the story were so different now from before.

When she was a child, the tale of the young protagonist going hungry and freezing to death because no one would reach a hand out, was just a sad story.

However, it was different now.

Just before dying, next to her she had seen a vision of the one thing she wanted most, so she thought that it wasn’t entirely a tragedy.

Because those adults who saw the girl’s corpse and looked upon it with compassion, thinking, “How sad,” didn’t know what had happened to her that night.

The girl had been embraced by her “Beloved Grandmother,” which had been bliss.

From then on. Shizuka had wondered if she could see a vision in the flame of a match.

“A vision, huh?”

Shizuka peeled the vinyl covering off and took one out. She stood up from the sofa, rearranged her position, pulled the ashtray across the glass and pulled out one match.

The match burned much more brightly than she had thought it would.

Maybe it was because the room was so dim; the flame illuminated the space, floating unusually brightly. As if it was spreading out from another world into this room where it was cut off. As the wood caught fire, she blew it out and placed it in the ashtray. No one in the house smoked, though they had a sparkling glass ashtray as an ornament, where the cinders were laid out.

When you use a match, it changed that much from before to afterwards, you could say. That was all. No vision appeared. Because that had been, from beginning to end, a gift from a God who had pitied the girl.

A not freezing or starving girl who went to school everyday would not be rewarded with this.

“I’m glad to have chocolate bonbons to put in my mouth.”

That was a feeling that the little match girl who had been hungry never even came close to, she guessed. “If I were to die tomorrow, would God show me a vision, I wonder.”

What were God’s criteria for handing out salvation? Probably if a lamb was in a situation that fulfilled the requirements, He would, she thought.

If that was the case, then it was fine. Murmuring that, she took another match.

The yellow and orange flame was a bright spot. In the middle of it, the figures of two girls wearing the same school uniform as she appeared.

Hey, Shizuka smiled. Since I’m outside God’s limits, I can use my own power to draw it out.

No, this probably couldn't be called a vision. Why, because it was something she had seen recently at school and, just like rewatching videotape, it wasn't more than just playing it again.

They held hands as they walked, the two.

One of them was a second-year like Shizuka, but in another class, the other a first-year underclassman. The two were soeur.

There were no words between the two, however, the loops of black ribbon that tied up their hair shone like symbols of happiness.

Shizuka lowered the burned out match into the ashtray. Like a lingering memory, the white smoke rose up.

It wasn't that she was jealous. She did not want to be like them. Then, why was she so interested in them?

Certainly, it was a beautiful spectacle, which made her smile as she remembered it. But was it more than that, she questioned.

Shizuka picked up another match. This time, the sight that came to mind was that of a first-year student waiting in front of Maria-sama.

At first glance, the lines looked thin, but if you looked more closely, you became a little more acquainted with the girl. This girl who was waiting, was the soeur who had once canceled their relationship. The onee-sama appeared, and the girl with braided hair bowed deeply and said, "Please make me your soeur."

Look at that.

In reality, that may not have been what happened, it was just an image that Shizuka could have easily reconstructed. The school paper, the "Lillian Kawaraban" article must have been written skillfully to leave that impression. Or maybe, because she had seen all those girls who had been so easily influenced, reconciled. Probably it was all of them combined, she thought.

Either way, that girl's actions had truly transformed the high school with a tremendous impact.

To return a rosary, then once again return to have it placed on one's neck was extraordinary. You could say she rallied not from zero, but from minus.

However, such hesitation was not seen in that girl. If there was something that she wanted, the no thought of dignity or propriety stopped her from going straight ahead for it. It was a refreshing, and likeable personality. Shizuka laid the burnt out match in the ashtray and lit another one. This time, a fair-skinned, fleeting beauty appeared in the flame.

That face came to mind but nothing more than that appeared. That person was, of the earlier pair, the first-year student, but no more than that came to mind.

But soon the flame went out.

So. The vision she had thought she wanted to see eluded her. Then, what would you say she wanted to see? What was it that she wanted?

"I don't know."

Shizuka held her head in her hands.

The current situation was painful, she longed for someone to save her from it.

But what, specifically, she desired, wasn't indicated.

She could not expect God to hold out his hand here.

Now, Shizuka was at a loss for words for why that little match girl's grandmother's warm chest was less worthy than Nero in the painting by Rubens.

"...Help me." Her eyes were closed, her ears were shut.

Outside the window, the illumination flashed on and off annoyingly.

The refrigerator gave a low rumble, the rice cooker chuckled insolently, the scream of an ambulance from the distant main road all got on her nerves.

“Ah....” What was she doing?

One by one, there came a really little sound. It was always there, so she had never noticed.

” ‘Shizuka-chan.’ ” As she had necessarily rejected the outside world, there came a voice from her inner darkness.

“I want someone like Shizuka-chan, another reliable person in the Rose Mansion.”

A familiar voice. It was nostalgic, the voice of the former Rosa Chinensis.

“Well, isn’t Youko-chan that kind of reliable person now?”

The answer came from the former chorus club president.

She remembered. This was a single frame from when Shizuka was still a first-year.

The location was the music room. The former Rosa Chinensis was close friends with the former chorus leader, and would stop by the music room before practice started or after it finished to chat. Shizuka had not joined in the conversation, but she had been working on arranging a score, so the conversation naturally reached her ears. “Youko-chan” had already been made the former Rosa Chinensis’ little sister. The generations had changed and now Rosa Chinensis was superb.

“She’s a second-year. What will she do if she’s alone, but.”

“But?”

“There’s one person in the first-year she wants, she says, and means it.”

“Hmm.” As the former chorus leader sighed, she reached out and embraced Shizuka’s shoulders.

“But, this girl’s no good. Because we don’t know when she’ll be flying off to Italy.”

“Oh, is that right? Shizuka-chan?”

Before she could answer, the former chorus president said, from her side, “By saying that, she’s cut herself off. From being requested to become soeur. A few people have come here for that purpose.”

“Perhaps, it’s just expedient? In reality, there’s someone she has in mind, and is secretly waiting for an invitation?” Then she peered into her face closely. Because the former chorus club president hadn’t said anything, Shizuka had chuckled and said, “Maybe.”

“Maybe? You mean it’s true? Then, you should just say that. Because that relationship can be mediated. For the sake of cute Shizuka-chan, one or two of us can pitch in and help.”

“Wait. It’s no good making promises without thinking them through. The other person might already have a soeur. If that’s the case, there would be carnage, a total bloodbath.” The two third-years went off on their own continuing the conversation, leaving Shizuka behind.

“So? Does that person have a soeur? Or not?” Drawing closer, her mouth open.

“Um. I, don’t really have a particular person I’ve set my mind on, I was just saying...”

“What the, you don’t have a person in mind? How boring. In that case, what do you think? Our little white one will be left all alone otherwise.”

The former Rosa Chinensis spoke like she might about a puppy but, Shizuka understood. Who she meant.

“Is Sei-chan no good?”

Sei.

Hearing that name come from the former chorus president's mouth formally, Shizuka felt a complicated mix of relief and a tightening of her chest.

“What about Shiori-san?”

The former Rosa Chinensis cast her eyes down. At that time, although Rosa Gigantea en bouton had no soeur, she did have an extremely strong bond with that fated person.

“But, we don't know what will happen in the future. I have my Sachiko-chan and Rosa Foetida has Rei-chan. So, as to not be defeated, we want to line someone like Shizuka-chan up, but haven't found anyone.”

“I'm honored Rosa Chinensis.” Ending things diplomatically with a smile, Shizuka left that place.

The words were appreciated but, because her objective was to study abroad, even if she had not said it, everything would be left aside as she prepared for that.

The bomb that Satou Sei-sama had not take a soeur previously was a believable part of the conversation.

That Shiori-san had not become a little sister. Who would have become that person's soeur?

“Why is that,” she muttered as she returned to the present. Now, she was at that person's side, that first year student, like she was meant to be there.

To be able to see that future, she would have to postpone going to Italy.

Tears ran down her cheeks. With a shaking hand, Shizuka took out a match. She felt like she was praying. Like, dear God, please save me.

Let me get rid of this horrible emotion, this person inside my heart.

At the time she felt this feeling took hold of her, she wasn't going to Italy. To make a song resound in people's hearts was her reason for singing.

After striking it several times, finally the match was lit.

God did not appear together with the flame. However, now maybe Shizuka could see the figure she wanted the most.

“Rosa Gigantea...Satou Sei-sama.”

“Good day.” That person turned with a grin toward Shizuka.

“I’ve always liked you.”

“I see. Thank you.”

Just as she said that, her features began to crumble.

“—” The angle she held it at was bad; the match tip burned, then went out. Shizuka quickly took another match, summoning up the vision. Before long, those noble features appeared.

This face she wanted to touch, how many times had she wished for that. Shizuka touched that cheek. This was a dream. Therefore, no one had to hold back, no one would care.

“Sei-sama. I admire you.” The first time she touched that skin it was cold, stiff, as if it were the surface of a stone statue.

“I see. Thank you.” At the same time she laughed, that stiff face crumbled apart like sand. What had been Satou Sei-sama gathered underfoot, where a wind blew it away until there was nothing left.

“Sei-sama-” Shizuka took another match in a daze. Whereupon a slightly more roughly hewn Satou Sei appeared. When she carelessly touched it, it crumbled away again. Shizuka cautiously approached and spoke.

“Sei-sama. I love you.”

At which, “I see. Thank you.”

It repeated, every time, the exact same expression, only the same words. However, Shizuka waited. The match flame did not disappear. There might be another remark.

But no matter how long she waited, nothing else happened. Like it was a television still frame, that person did not move.

Shizuka lit the next match. In every case, in response to her disclosure of her feelings, only that smile floated up, and her “Thank you” and expression of thanks were repeated. No matter how many matches she lit, it repeated. But she kept on, because maybe the next would continue the scene.

As she lit the match, Shizuka noticed hopefully. The reason it couldn’t not proceed.

That is, firing off “like” in such rapid succession was not the way she would confess in the real world.

This vision was, after all, her creation. Shizuka had not created a real reflection of Satou Sei’s response to a confession by an underclassman she was not close with.

When a confession was made, what kind of reaction would that person have.

Just smile, as if it were a joke?

If she already had a soeur, then seriously refuse it?

Or —

“Sei-sama, wait.” As the next one grew dim, Shizuka called out desperately. However, there was no reason for her to wait. This wasn’t reality, it was a vision.

“Come here, Shizuka.” As if she had said everything she wanted to say, she turned her back as she dimmed.

“Wait, Sei-sama. Please, let me go.” Before she knew it, in this deep place, she had lost her way. This was the labyrinth of her heart.





As Sei-sama's figure disappeared into the dark, it appeared as if the edges of her mouth turned upwards just slightly.

"I don't understand." Shizuka shook her head back and forth violently.

Because I don't understand, I'm confused. Because I don't understand, I seek help.

"Shizuka, what are you hoping for?" The figure completely disappeared.

"Really, aren't you going to answer?" And again, the voice.

"—" Looking around at her environs, Shizuka found herself holding what was left of a burnt out match in her hand, sitting by herself on the living room sofa.

As always, the house next door's illumination flashed and clicked, the refrigerator and the rice cooker made their sounds, not at all concerned.

"I'm home -"

Just then, her mother returned.

"Shizuka, are you home? What's the matter, the lights aren't on."

The sound of the switch came and light surrounded her.

"Welcome home. What, I must have fallen asleep." Standing, she stretched, to find that her hands and feet had gotten cold and her feet were asleep.

"What is that?" Her mother noticed the ashtray full of burnt matches. "Were you trying to be the Little Match Girl or something?"

"You understand?" Shizuka asked, her feet prickling.

"Well. In a normal household where someone smoked, I might have thought that you were trying smoking. But my daughter wouldn't go that far."

“Why not?”

“Because it would be bad for your throat and lungs, wouldn’t it?”

“That’s true.”

Because that was definitely the case, she smiled. Her mother’s answer was sensible. In Shizuka’s situation, if she had said “I believe in you” it would have been creepy and she wouldn’t have been happy.

“Well? Did anything appear?” Her mother looked cheerfully into the remains of the bonfire, as Shizuka ducked her head.

“That I went out to our house where there was a chicken in the oven and something like crab salad in the refrigerator.”

“Plus, cake.” Her mother took the box with the Christmas cake and placed it on the table. The order had been placed a month ago, for the special chocolate cake made by a neighborhood bakery that made a limit of twenty at a time.

“Too bad, the ghost of Grandma didn’t come out.” Shizuka reported, as she opened the cake box. To which her mother, who was going to get the chicken, turned and said, “Don’t say such scary things.”

“Mom, don’t you want to see Grandma?”

“When she died, I thought it would be all right if I saw her as a spirit.”

“And now?”

“I don’t think that. When so many years have passed since she died, if she hasn’t passed into Nirvana, it would be sad, right. To have regrets in this world.”¹

(E: In Buddhism, as well as many other belief systems, regrets or unfinished business tie a spirit to this world.)

“Regrets, huh?” Shizuka nabbed the figure of Santa that had been made from meringue and powdered sugar and popped it into her mouth, then shut the lid of the cake box.

“Wait for your father to come home before eating the cake, will you?” As her mother warned her, Santa was already in her mouth, melting.

“If I died right now, that would be one regret I would have.”

“...What are you saying? You’re taking revenge on your father, aren’t you. You’ve got a grudge from when he took that one pink soumen and ate it in spring.”²

(E: Soumen are wheat flour noodles. In spring, especially for Girl’s Day, you can find them colored white pink and green.)

“That’s not it.”

“Because you’re young, you remember and retaliate after a long time, when the other person has completely forgotten.”

“Yeah?” As expected of a mother, she noticed everything.

“And you also make that face every time you pull a prank.”

“This face?”

“The face of a person who has drunk cola and been refreshed, kind of face. Hey. What are you thinking about doing?”

“Doing? Don’t talk to me like I’m a troublemaker.”

However, Shizuka was thinking, “Is that it, I wonder.” That she from now on had said she would do it, and maybe it would disturb the minds of some kinds of people, it had that meaning.

Moreover, she thought she would dare to do it.

I understand. What I was asking of myself.

What she wanted was the straight gaze of that person. Created only for Shizuka and with no fake words.

What would she have to do in order to obtain that? She would think about that, and let her love throb in her heart.

“I wonder if I should get my hair cut first.” Shizuka ran her fingers through her long hair and smiled.

In Library II

Yumi.

Really, Yumi.

(Mm.)

It's no good is it, falling asleep in this place.

(Ah, yes. It'll happen soon. No, I am not asleep.)

You're a hopeless girl. Even when I shake you, you won't wake up.

(Therefore, um. I'm not asleep, obviously. Onee-sama.)

This is troublesome.Fine, all of you can just go home ahead of us then. Me? After I read five more pages of this book. Until then, she can sleep. Right. That's what I think too.

(All of you? What are you thinking, what's going on?)

Yes, good day.

(Good day, she says. Wait please, Onee-sama. I'm waking up now.)

"Onee-sama!" Yumi's own pathetic voice cried out as her eyes opened.

"Onee-sama...., a dream? Ah, mm, reality?"

This was the Rose Mansion, and the form of Onee-sama was not to be seen. Where was Onee-sama, other than Yumi there was no one else.

"Umm." Calm down, calm down. Put your thoughts in order, won't you.

"First of all, Shimako-san and the others said they are going to the gymnasium, and from there will return to the Rose Mansion, where Onee-sama will want to drink some tea...."

Right there was a memory. After that, because it was suspicious, starting a conversation about something that was bothering her about the school festival, as if it were an idle chat. But as she came to no conclusion, at that point, she fell prostrate across the table.

“I wonder if everyone will come back.”

In the drain board by the sink, there were six cups that had been used, now clean and nicely drying.

At any rate, “I’m not running after her” so she hadn’t stood up, she rethought her “Wait, please.”

“It seemed as if Onee-sama would have remained behind....” After she read the book, something like that.

As if in support of that, Sachiko-sama’s school coat was hanging over her shoulders. Sachiko-sama’s school bag had been left on the chair.

Anyway, Yumi rubbed her chest, relaxing. At least social graces seemed to be returning to the younger sister now. Probably she had just gone out of the room, “in the area” for a moment.

Then, she’s sure to come back right away. She would just tidy up her things and wait for Onee-sama.

“Hm?”

She closed the report book and was crowding it back into her bag, when Yumi noticed “something”, and turned it over to look at the cover. There, as she had wrestled with drowsiness, had been drawn a cryptic rebus of memo and doodle, when there had been no choice of writing implement, and “stroke” and “stop” had to do for good handwriting.³

(E: Strokes and stops are part of radicals in Kanji.)

Yumi read it out loud.

“I am going to the library. Sachiko.” That was all of the message. But, that was all that needed to be communicated.

“I see. Onee-sama went to the library.”

To return the book she had finished reading, surely that was it. Just then, she could hear the sound of someone climbing the stairs.

“It’s Onee-sama.” Yumi rushed over to the entrance, and just as she reached the biscuit door, it opened, so she flew out of the room.

“Gyaa-” Just at the moment that the person approached the door, the door she did not open opened, so the person in front of it cried out when someone she did not expect was vomited from the room.

“Gyaa - ... huh?”

“__”

When she thought about it, it was definitely a different voice than Sachiko-sama’s. Her chest felt a little tight, but she turned with a look of blame towards the girl. Incidentally, the girl’s hair was worn in banana curls. Her old friend, you could say —

“Oh, it’s T- Touko-chan....”

“Touko-chan is very sorry for her clumsiness. And, good day.”

“W- wait a second.” Yumi grabbed Touko’s arm as she turned around.

“Why are you doing such a quick U-turn?”

“Because Yumi-sama, Touko has no business here it seems.” Touko-chan pulled her arm out of her grasp roughly and turned away in stony silence.

“That sounds like you’re going around taking orders for a liquor store. Anyway. Come in, come in. I’ll get some tea ready.”

“Taking orders for a liquor store-?” Touko-chan reluctantly entered the room.

When Yumi saw to it that Touko-chan was seated, she went over to the sink to prepare tea. She should probably be getting ready to go home, but she didn't care. Until the day before yesterday, she had been an assistant, but today Touko-chan was a guest after all.

She only had to wash the cup, and even Onee-sama would be likely to entertain guests with great care and not say that she had to go home.

“By the way, Sachiko-onee....I mean Rosa Chinensis is...?”

“Ah, you came because you wanted to see Sachiko-sama?”

“...That is incorrect.”

“So that's it. You saw that Sachiko-sama wasn't here, so you were going to go home, now.” Yumi inclined her head as if to ask “If not, then why did Touko-chan come?”

“I met Rosa Foetida a little while ago, and at that time, asked if Rosa Chinensis and Yumi-sama had arrived at the Rose Mansion yet, that's all.”

“If that's it, then just wait a little while. Because I think Sachiko-sama will return any moment.”

“But I've already told you, I didn't come to see Rosa Chinensis, didn't I?”

She had.

“Then, was it me you came to see-?” She said it jokingly, but what she got in response was unexpected.

“That is correct. But, it's all right. After all, what kind of existence is to be referred to as ‘Oh, it's Touko-chan...?’”

Ah-, this was a grudge being held over a slip of the tongue. “I'm sorry. Please forgive me and accept my apology. It was just that I thought Sachiko-sama had returned, that's all.”

“Hmph. Yumi-sama, you would make that kind of face in front of your Onee-sama, huh.”

“That kind of...what kind of face?”

“As if all the muscles had gone loose, very homely.”

“Ah, I, I see.” This detestable speech was Touko-chan’s revenge for earlier, Yumi repeated to herself. She didn’t think that, and she hadn’t done it. But afterwards, she would make sure to not use that face in front of Onee-sama.

“So, what did you want to talk to me about?”

She placed three cups upon the table and filled them with tea; Yumi took a seat facing Touko-chan. One was for Touko-chan, one for herself and the third was for Sachiko-sama who was bound to return sooner or later.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing!?”

What the heck. Such an arrogant attitude. Yumi instinctively stood up. Her retaliation “Homely Speech” was already over. So.

“I don’t know. If there was something to discuss, you would know, wouldn’t you?” Touko-chan averted her face abruptly.

“Eh, M, Me?”

“...That’s why I said that it was fine. Whatever it was, forget it, okay?”

There was a feeling of being thrown something more than of being picked on, as Touko conscientiously lowered her head and blew on her tea.

What was it she was trying to say? One of them was being left behind, her expression said. There was no way Touko-chan would come down on her own, Yumi felt.

“Hint.”

“I don’t know what you mean by a hint. Why would I know about it, whatever that business was?”

“Unh.” Yumi put a composite together based on the idea that “discussion” should go in where Touko-chan had come to the Rose Mansion for “that business.”

“Oh.” Something came up in the net. Right, at that, she slowly dragged a memory up onto the beach.

“Yumi-sama, um, why are you making motions like you are playing tug of war...?”

Because right now, she was just getting to a good spot. Drag, drag.

“Ah.” Got it. “Was it perhaps because I visited the first-year Tsubaki classroom after school? Someone told you about that?”

“Well, yes....” Although her face said she didn’t understand, Touko-chan affirmed it. Somehow, Yumi was still in the dragging pose it seemed.

“Is that it? I’m sorry. I just wanted to thank you both.”

“Thank us, both?” Touko-chan’s eyebrows rose.

“Yes. I’m sorry I caused you to have to return the visit.”

“There’s nothing to apologize for but....”

“Mm?”

“You already gave us the mechanical pencils and frankfurters in thanks.” Touko-chan said, a little sourly. “You didn’t have to extend your thanks again.”

“But, I wanted to see you.” Because if she saw them, then she could thank them. Honestly, it was more fun that she had expected, even assuming their reliability.

“...So, you had wanted to see Kanako-san?”

“Not specifically, you know.” Before Yumi said, “I didn’t want to see her”, Touko-chan looked out the window and said offhandedly “That girl. She’s changed.”

“I, I see.”

Kanako-chan had changed. She knew that. A lot happened to her at the school festival after all, and her values and her relationships to the people around her had changed, so it wasn’t that strange.

However, why would Touko-chan break the ice on that?

“Rosa Chinensis hasn’t returned, I guess.”

“So it seems. She’s late.”

Their time drinking tea was already over. Probably the tea for Sachiko-sama was tired of waiting and had gone cold; she’d need to change the tea in the cup.

“Where did she go?”

“The Library.”

“The Library, you say?” Touko-chan inclined her head.

“What?”

“Nothing. I just think that that may be incorrect.”

“Why do you say that?”

To Yumi’s question, Touko answered, “I came here from the Library.”

Just so.

Joanna

What did this person say, you wonder?

“If you can’t handle the rehearsal satisfactorily, how will you do it for the actual event, I wonder?”

Those words might seem to be the answer, but actually it was the opposite. In order to be the best on the day of the show, one practices repeatedly, doesn’t one. That’s what I wanted to say but then, for a short time I pretended to become “The lowerclassman who became dejected because of a scolding.” One word in rebuttal in that situation would become who knows how many in return. Though I didn’t want her to think that she had defeated me with her words, it would have been far worse for the others if practice had been interrupted any further.

Today’s rehearsal space was the front part of a classroom, with all the desks moved to the back of the room. We had reached the climax of the play the drama club was going to perform for the school festival, Wakakusa Monogatari.

I was silent, eyes down — the meaning of this was to show that I had conceded the point but, mistakenly Sempai A misunderstood it to be an invitation to be even more arrogant in her attitude.

The adviser was absent at a staff meeting. The president, who was always a good buffer, had just left the room for a short time to handle some tasks in regards to the school festival, just before it happened. This was the place where I, acting the role of Amy, bit into a line. This was her cue.

“Matsudaira-san, you’re only one of the lead roles, I wonder if you’re not taking practice too lightly, if you have the ability to do it. High School Drama club is a different case than Middle School club. We allowed ourselves to be dragged down when you were cast as that role, perhaps?”

When I heard that, I could hear the sound of laughter in the midst of the club members in that place.

(Hmph.) So that was the way they thought. It wasn't just the one person; it was three or four of them.

(Well then, if my acting ability is that important.)

Masterpiece.

“Is something funny?”

Up to that point I had been more or less able to tolerate it however, my patience ran out when they laughed at me, and Sempai A rubbed me the wrong way.

“Nothing.” She seemed to be laughing as she said it, I thought.

Whether the casting had been dragged down until now, she didn't know. One would expect that the casting was as much higher as the status of the High School Drama Club was of the middle school.

After all, this sempai had been noted by Eimi-sensei to be perfect for the role of Jennie Snow. But, for the convenience of the time for the performance, the scene where Amy has pickled limes had been cut.

“What are you saying?”

“Don't you think you were conceited, accepting the role of Amy?”

“I had no intention of being conceited. However, if you have some specific advice, I'm sure I'd be pleased to take it.”

If she even saw one tear, this sempai would have been satisfied, and become kinder, it was easy to see. But, that alone I could never do. I could do fake crying. But, where is there a group that that would be necessary to do that to join? Even in acting, the disgrace of crying will get one labeled, and hinder one's future.

“If you say something, I will do it.”

Sempai A smiled coldly as the door opened and the club president returned.

“Sorry I’m late. Ah, you’re in the middle of rehearsal. Please continue.”

“So, let’s take it from the top of that scene one more time.”

Semapi A turned her back as if she was running away but, I couldn’t just let the conversation be over, then enter back into practice with good feeling.

“Sempai, I haven’t yet heard your response.”

“About what, Touko-chan?” The president asked me, somehow feeling the atmosphere at that point.

When I did not offer an explanation, she turned to look over her shoulder and asked Sempai A the same question.

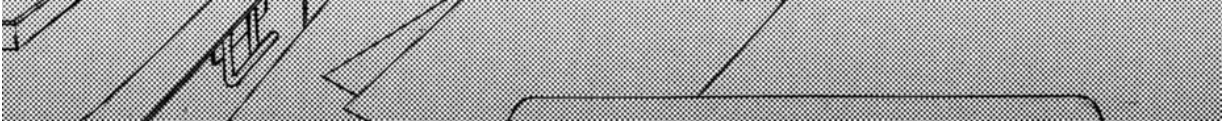
“We were just cautioning this first-year to not hold us back.” Sempai A spit out the answer.

“Touko-chan isn’t holding us back, is she? I think that for a first-year, her acting is pretty good.”

“Buchou, I don’t understand why you are so partial to her. We have who knows how many girls with this amount of acting ability.”

On hearing this, Touko somehow became annoyed. This sempai wasn’t concerned about the performance; she was just unable to stomach Touko’s existence. What she had just said was pointless. It was impossible to repair this complicated relationship.





“In that case, why don’t you play Amy?” I said.

There was no way she could say that they were being dragged down, if she suddenly tumbled into the role of Amy; I spoke with a cold glance and a low, terrible voice. For those who only knew one side of me, they saw me become a monster before their eyes.

I made this request, confident in my ability to perform the role of Davis-sensei or Aunt March. I wanted her to explain clearly who had what ability.

“Here, please do my lines. Take my script and let me see, please.” I grabbed the script with I had laid on the table, opened it to the page, and thrust it at the sempai’s chest.

“Touko-chan, stop it.”

I heard Buchou’s voice, but I couldn’t bring myself to brake completely.

“Y, you don’t think I can do it, do you?” Sempai A had taken the script and was tracing the words with her finger.

“Not at all. I’m sure that Sempai will be able to do Amy much more skillfully than I.”

“Of course. If you weren’t here, that wouldn’t trouble our club at all.”

I did not want to be with the half-crying sempai for one second more, so I flew out of the room.

Really, what had I become? —Nevertheless.

I wondered what that person was saying.

“What are you saying, you don’t want to hear.” Already, my feelings about what I wanted were beginning to turn around.

Surely, after two days had passed, the feeling that she had gone too far would begin to bud. But, until she had completely forgotten, she would

throw herself wholeheartedly into practice on the Yamayurikai's play.

Despite that.

If she quit the Torikaebaya and returned to the Drama club, the people in the Rose Mansion would wonder why she was so excessively harsh.

When it came to things regarding her, there was one person who would understand.

What had I done, what had I thrown away; there was still feelings of regrets about Wakakusa Monogatari.

I wanted to play Amy.

"I'm sure that Sempai will be able to do Amy much more skillfully than I," had come out of my mouth but, there was no one who could do Amy better than I could. I was an indispensable piece on the board in order to make the play a success.

"You say I'm not necessary?"

On the other hand, when she had been told "don't come to the Yamayurikai" she would have been hurt. In the end, all that was, was a whitewashed "You're fired."

What was she grieving for anyway?

Here was not the place for a story about her whereabouts. What had she become, and, what would she throw away after this.

But. The person who gave me the last rites, what was she thinking, as they suddenly abdicated their responsibility and began running wildly around.

"If I accompany you from here, will you go to Drama club?"

"Can you accept walking out on this play?"

What was she saying, this person. Even "Come to my house."

Is she an idiot? Did she lay in wait just to persuade me?

First to tell me “You’re fired” then to scold me like a “beloved Onee-sama.”

However, she really didn’t mind very much. Whatever this unselfish smile said, she was defeated.

“I understand.” I took back the hand that she held.

I didn’t need a gentle hand. I was not a doll to be embraced by Beth.

I really didn’t need to return to be Amy. However—.

As I began to step away, that optimistic voice followed me.

“Eat well and sleep well and stress won’t get the better of you. If you want to complain, come to wherever I am, okay?”

Really, that person.

She’s an idiot.

With a bitter smile, I nodded to Beth, in the middle of a completely different story.

*

In Library III

“Library? Is that right?” As the words flew out of Touko-chan’s mouth before she could think about it, Yumi blinked. Touko-chan spoke, before she could say ‘then why didn’t you meet her.’

“But, well. There are several paths linking the Library and the Rose Mansion after all. It’s possible that if we went different ways we would have missed one another.”

“But, you know.” Yumi took out a blank report form, and she began to enumerate the more ambiguous characters of Sachiko-sama’s message to her, then drew in simple figures.

“Now, here, right. The Library is here. So then, here’s the school buildings in between –huh?”

The high school building, in which she had passed a year and a half. Though it was well-known territory, when replacing it with a two-dimensional view, it became difficult. As she struggled against heavy odds to draw a chart, “Excuse me. The school building looks like this and faces that way” Touko-chan spoke from her side, with unexpectedly skillful amendments.

“Mm. Right, right. Then, this is the route Sachiko-sama took, I think. From the beginning, she had decided that her destination was the Library, we can see.” Yumi drew a line along the back of the mechanical pencil to delineate the most reasonable way and the shortest time to the Library.

Even though Sachiko-sama often seemed like an alien because of her speech, for normal corporeal people, it was not possible to pass through walls or jump over buildings. Therefore, there was no way to draw a straight line with a ruler between the two points of the Rose Mansion and the Library, therefore it generally seemed most likely that she walked through the halls of the school building.

“Let’s go in reverse through Touko-chan’s route. Since it wasn’t necessary to specifically go around the back of the school building...”

“You don’t think that it was the same as Sachiko-sama’s?”

“Yes.” So then, why hadn’t the two met?

“Touko-chan, where in the Library were you?”

“The Reading Room. Rosa Chinensis was going to which one?”

“She was going to return a book so it would have been the Reading Room after all.”

Inside the Library, though there were other rooms and conference rooms, users largely did their business in the Reading Room.

“Or maybe Sachiko-sama had arrived just before Touko-chan left, something like that.”

“Touko spent a fairly long time near the entrance at the lending calendar, but did not see her. I did notice the Rosa Foetidas arrive.”⁴

(E: Touko is referring to herself in third-person here. She does this throughout.)

“Rei-sama and Yoshino-san went to the Library.” If that was the case, then the earlier supposition could not be confirmed. Surely Sachiko-sama would have arrived at the Library before Rei-sama.

“Say, Touko-chan, did you stop somewhere along the way here?”

Because, if she had gotten off the shortest route (assumed), then it was possible that they had missed each other at that time. However, Touko-chan answered “I did not stop in anywhere,” clearly.

“Speaking of stopping along the way, maybe Touko-chan didn’t, but Rosa Chinensis did.”

“Where?”

“The...somewhere like her classroom?”

“I see. Then, I understand.”

If she had remembered that she had left something behind as she walked down the hall, she might have stopped in her classroom. If that was the case, that could be one of the causes of her being late. –But.

“Even so, she’s late.” Touko-chan said dryly.

“Right? Ahah, Touko-chan you think so too?” Yumi obviously thought so, too, as she stood up.

Since Touko-chan had come to the Rose Mansion, with one thing and another twenty minutes had passed. It was a fact that Sachiko-sama had gone out of here a little earlier than that. Moreover, with Touko-chan’s testimony that she had not met Sachiko-sama, it exceeded thirty minutes, it was apparent.

“But, maybe she became involved in a conversation with a classmate, something like that.”

“While I sit and wait? Would she really chat then?”

After she said it, Yumi thought about it. Would Sachiko-sama in that situation, think, “My poor cute little sister, waiting,” or would she think “My little sister is with friends, she can wait a little while”?

“That wouldn’t be Rosa Chinensis’ intention, she was probably detained. If she was in the middle of a serious conversation she might not be in the position to say, “My soeur is waiting, good bye,’ isn’t that so?”

“A serious conversation...?”

“For instance, I meant.”

Hmm.

“I wonder if she was stopped by someone for a moment.”

“Eh?”

“To ask Sachiko-sama for assistance.”

“Like she went to greet them, but it was a mistake?”

“You could say that.”

Yumi walked over to the window, and looked down outside. She could not make out Sachiko’s form in the first floor windows in the school building near the entrance to the Rose Mansion. She remained that way as five or ten minutes passed, she thought.

“How selfish.” Touko put both hands on the table and stood up. “Touko is going home.”

“Wait.” Yumi called out to Touko-chan, grabbing her arm. “Please.”

“I’m not here to watch the house.”

“I understand.”

“Then, why?”

“Wait for five minutes.”

“Five minutes.”

“Because we haven’t straightened up.”

“And?”

“Then I’ll leave with Touko-chan.”

“Huh?”

“Then, I have one more request. I’m sorry but, while I’m peeping into the third-floor Matsu classroom, I’d like you to wait out in the hallway here.”

Yumi took the map that they had previously drawn together, and circled the area where “here” was with her finger. In the shortest route from Sachiko’s classroom, that spot was a crossroads.

“In case you miss one another?” Touko-chan said, after posing as if she were pondering this for a moment. “I understand. If it is for that, I will accompany you.”

“Thanks-” Yumi grabbed both of Touko-chan’s hands, squeezing them.

“To do this, I will remain free for another three minutes.”

“Fast.” At which Yumi assiduously washed the cup she had used. With an effort she drank the tea she had made for Sachiko-sama in one gulp so it wouldn’t go to waste. Because she had done it so quickly, it steamed lightly. Touko-chan watched the Yumi mood intently.

Until last week, if Yumi hadn’t involved herself in that situation, there was no way that Touko would have assisted her today. Having rid herself of the title of “Person who will assist until the school festival” now, Touko-chan probably would have clearly made that distinction.

“It might be none of my business but, thinking about if you miss her, perhaps you can leave a letter for Rosa Chinensis?”

“Won’t Touko-chan be there, in case we miss each other?”

“There’s a one in ten thousand chance.”

Touko-chan looked like she was about to bolt, unexpectedly cautious.

“I see.” However, she decided take a page of the notebook in which had been written “I am going to the Library” because she had a point.

It would be stupid to use the same exact words as Sachiko-sama, after all. But if she addressed it to the same person to whom she wrote, “I am going

to look for Onee-sama,” that would be weird, and “I am going out for a bit” would not communicate what she meant at all.

Going from the Rose Mansion into the school building, there were no people in the hallway. It had become chilly quickly, from the hall, both windows and classroom doors had been closed with a snap, so that the voices of any students who remained in the classrooms did not reach the hallway. As a result, it felt a bit embarrassing to speak in a loud voice while walking, so until Yumi arrived at the arranged place, she only exchanged two or three words with Touko-chan.

“So sorry, but could you wait here?” So saying, she walked away, as Touko’s voice came from behind.

“Please don’t rush. I’ll wait here properly.”

“Mm.”

Although she had said that, she didn’t want to keep her waiting there, so Yumi picked up her pace as she proceeded. She was accustomed to going back and forth to Onee-sama’s class, third-year Matsu class. As she came close, the light leaking from the window seemed to beckoning Yumi.

“Ex~cuse me.” As she opened the door of the third year Matsu classroom, the students who had remained turned to look simultaneously.

“Ah, it’s Fukuzawa Yumi-chan,” said the student closest to the door, as she stood up from her desk.

“Good day. Ah, is my Onee-sama—”

“Sachiko-san? She’s not here.”

“Looks like, huh.” It certainly didn’t look like Onee-sama was around, as she surveyed the room.

“Wasn’t she going to the Rose Mansion today?”

“Ah. She was there previously, but she went out for a while and hasn’t yet returned.”

As Yumi explained, a voice spoke from somewhere. “If you mean Sachiko-san, she went to the Library.”

She recognized the voice by the sound, even as the former Editor-in-chief of the “Lillian Kwaraban,” Tsukiyama Minako-sama’s face became visible within the group of students. But, surely this wasn’t her class.

“Minako-sama, why are you here?” Yumi asked Minako-sama, as she exited the group.

“You mean I’m not allowed to cross the fence between classes to see a friend?”

“Excuse me for being rude.”

That was right. When she saw Minako-sama, immediately it came to mind that she was running after a scoop, but she was a former member of the newspaper club and was now just regular student at Lillian Jogakuen High School. There was nothing wrong with just taking a class normally, or talking to a friend as usual.

“Did you meet Sachiko-sama somewhere?” Yumi asked, after absorbing the former “If you mean Sachiko-san, she went to the Library.” Just so.

“Mm. Yes...about thirty minutes ago I guess, we met suddenly in the hallway over there, she said she was going to the library. What, Sachiko-san hasn’t returned?”

“Yeah.”

“She’s late, huh. In comparison with a conversation, returning a book is—” Minako-sama muttered as she looked at her wristwatch, then turning and waving at her friend over her shoulder. “Sorry. I have something I have to get done, so I’ll be leaving. Good day, everyone.”

As she followed Yumi out of the third-year Matsu classroom, Minako-sama's face changed and she asked Yumi, "Um, is it all right?"

"That she's missing and unaccounted for, is a little worrying."

"Missing and unaccounted for...."

"Anyway, at the moment, I'm the last eyewitness right?" Minako-sama beat her fist against her breast, as if saying 'I'm dependable.' However, saying that she was the last eyewitness, at this point there were two eyewitnesses, Minako-sama and Yumi. Since Touko-chan has not met up with Sachiko-sama.

But, well, because she offered her help, Yumi was allowed to interrogate her as they walked.

"Minako-sama, you say you saw her in that hallway."

That, was the hallway around the corner from the one that Yumi and Touko-chan had come from. As she thought, they had mistaken her route. "When you parted, did Sachiko-sama go around the corner to the library?"

"I don't know about that."

"Eh?"

"I definitely met her in the hallway but, when we parted we went to different places."

Met her in the hallway, but went to different places. And the direction the other took couldn't be determined.... It was a puzzle, wasn't it?

"The answer is the toilet. We met suddenly, and from there, as the two of us were chatting as we walked I went to the bathroom."

"The toilet?"

"I'm very sorry to trouble you with such indelicate conversation but, before that I had had a conversation with my little sister Mami in the grounds and

after exposure to the chill, I had to go to the bathroom. When I met Sachiko-san in the hallway, I was really on my way to the toilet. However, because our conversation was not yet over, Sachiko-san came with me. Then we chatted from inside and outside the stall, and when we reached a place where the conversation could be ended neatly, Sachiko-san left the bathroom before me.”

I see, so because of that, she couldn’t declare whether Sachiko-sama visited the Library or not.

“So, because she was making Yumi-san wait, she hurried up, huh.” Minako-sama muttered heartily, but even so, knowing that she hurried up her time in the toilet with a friend caused complicated feelings.

Returning to the place she had earlier separated from Touko-chan, she found the same waiting for her.

“Touko-chan, now I know one thing. I wasn’t mistaken about the route Sachiko-sama took but, because she spent some time in the bathroom, you didn’t meet up with her. Why didn’t we realize?”

“Based on testimony given by Tsukiyama Minako-sama of the newspaper club.”

“Huh, how did you...”

“After observing the state of affairs, I used reasoning to derive the rest.”

At which, from behind of the two, came the cheerful greeting “Good day, Matsudaira Touko-chan of the Drama Club” from Minako-sama.

“...Good day.” Touko-chan smiled in answer.

“Sachiko-sama hasn’t come.”

As Yumi returned to the third-year Matsu classroom, she thought back on the series of events. She tried to guess at what had happened. If Sachiko-sama has walked by here, Touko-chan should have been able to detain her.

“Thank you, Touko-chan. I’m sorry for making you accompany me.”

“Not at all. Well, then.” Bowing to the two upperclassmen, Touko-chan walked toward the entrance.

“Good day.” Yumi waved, turning and taking a step towards the Library.

“Um. May I ask one thing?” Touko-chan suddenly asked over her shoulder.

“W, what?”

But she looked back over her shoulder not at Yumi, but at Minako-sama.

“Minako-sama, why are you going with Yumi-sama?”

“Oh that. Because I decided that I’m interested. Instead of asking about the conclusion tomorrow, I’m interested to see it for myself.” Minako-sama smiled.

“Is that right?”

“Did I answer you?”

“Yes, thank you.” Lowering her head once more, Touko-chan walked away steadily.

“Um, what was Touko-chan saying?” Yumi shook her head back and forth.

“What? Just what was said and that you heard, right?” Minako-sama smiled as she walked forward.

“I heard, but.”

But there must be more than the superficial content, and she was dissatisfied. More than what Touko-chan asked, but rather Minako-sama’s answer.

“However, I think I misunderstood.”

“Huh?”

However, she had said. Whether she meant her own response, Yumi did not know. Just then, Minako-sama said, as she was going out the visitor's entrance, "That girl, Touko-chan. Look. When Yumi-chan and Sachiko-san were fighting, she caused me some anxiety. I made some inquiries among my friends."

"Ah—"

She remembered. Definitely, the kind of person who two-times with Onee-sama, and throws away the rosary at graduation.

"I said that that girl would become Yumi-san's rival, but was totally mistaken, —ah." In the middle of her conversation, Minako-sama saw a lone student in front of the library, and said to Yumi, "Please excuse me for a moment."

"Good day. Library?"

"Ah, Minako-san."

She had no memory of the face that turned. Maybe it was a third-year that Yumi had never had any point of contact with. Maybe it was rude to think this about an upperclassman, but she was the cute, adult type.

So she would not be a disturbance, Yumi continued walking. It was autumn in the grounds, and though after school it had been cleaned, leaves were scattered on the ground, and as she walked she made crunching noises. To Yumi's ears, came the sound of stealthy steps, then Minako-sama spoke strange words.

"I'm going to the reading room now. I have to look around."

"It's fine. these should be returned today, that's all." That person took three books from a bag, holding them out with a smile.

"I don't think the person herself will mind if you go around the edge."

"Right."

Whatever it was, from their expression, it was a knotty topic, but Yumi couldn't stop at this point and turn around.

"If it's her, I think so. But, whatever our feelings, of course there will be inquisitive eyes looking. We can't deny it individually, it would be silly. Because in public we have been seen to be close, and I don't want to look foolish."

So saying, that person did the unfathomable, and left. At the Library entrance, she put the books one by one into the book post box. It was outside the time for the Reading Room to be open.

"Really, it would be best if we didn't have to consider her."

"It's difficult, huh." Minako-sama looked as if something pained her, as she said it.

"Yes. Difficult."

The three books had been placed in the box, that person left with a "Good day," and walked on along the path that connected the Library to the statue of Maria-sama.

Minako-sama let out a big sigh, "Hah-" when that person has disappeared around the corner. What was the matter, thought Yumi as she watched, as Minako-sama said as if speaking to herself, "They are both my friends, I have to be strong."

"Huh?" She had been told the reason, but still she did not understand why Minako-sama had that expression. Because she had said 'both,' the characters of two people was in question. That person just now has been one of the people; there must surely be another person involved.

Just then, Minako-sama said, "Yumi-san, do you remember that conversation a little while ago?"

"Ummm. Ah, the conversation about Touko-chan?"

“Slightly before that. About two-timing.” Minako-sama stopped and picked up a twig that had fallen underfoot. Then bent it into a roughly Y shaped. A fork in the road.⁵

(E: “Futamata” which is the word used for two-timing also means a “fork in the road.”)

“Ah.” Yumi nodded with understanding. But, what then?

“That girl was one of the persons concerned.” Minako-sama said, while stroking the branch that grew the same on right and left. “And, the second person is in the Library. Maybe.”

It appeared that that was the answer to the “mysterious behavior” a little while ago.

Chocolate Coat

Inside the unpopular old greenhouse, there was a lone girl. The person she awaited had not come yet.

She raised her left arm in order to confirm the time, each time the interval was shorter.

The first time it was five minutes, the second three minutes, the third time after a minute.

She had looked at the watch so many times at that point, that even if the person she waited for showed up right then, she wasn't sure if she could stop looking.

This time, thirty seconds. Just enough to confirm that her watch was moving, then she dropped her arm again. Still she did not leave. She absolutely believed that the visitor would come.

Was this the place of the appointment? Behind the gymnasium, there was a new greenhouse. Perhaps she had mistaken that one for this?

But if she went to confirm that, that would be when "that girl" would come— she thought, so she did not move from that place. If she moved around unreasonably, she might draw attention to herself, which would be troublesome.

Today was the day when students everywhere were giving each other chocolate. That was why that girl had chosen this location, as a place that didn't stand out for an appointment, she was sure of it.

Sheesh, how much longer would she have to wait?

Her body was cold to the marrow. But by no means did she feel any pain. This was her punishment. Although she didn't think about it, feelings of guilt beat in her chest. It would be fine if it snowed soon.

It would be fine if the white snow buried this greenhouse and this sinful body that waited for that girl. If that happened, then maybe even Maria-sama could pity her a little.

Yasuko

Because they are human, everyone makes mistakes.

However, there are some things that time cannot heal, even with a long life.

*

It took her seventeen years to notice, but Yasuko had lived an ordinary girl's life.

She had become a Lillian student in middle school, had studied moderately and done sports moderately, had some fun moderately, and before she knew it three years had passed and she was progressing to high school.

It is important to understand that “ordinary” does not mean boring. It is progressing with the crowd. Although stopping along the way was fine, not too far off the road. Yasuko believed that she had the knack for weathering the stormy sea of human life.

If her friends invited her to join the Volunteer club as a member, she became acquainted with a sempai a year older than she, who found her suitable, so at the end of the first school term they swore to be soeur.

When she took the rosary from Onee-sama, of course her feelings were filled with happiness but, they also contained some relief. It was as if the first-years were lined up in a display case. Being purchased early in the season made her relax her chest in relief. —A completely erroneous mistake, as it turned out.

Therefore, as soon as Yasuko would become a second-year, her initial objective was to get herself a petite soeur on the very first day.

“But, what kind of girl would be good, is the question.” Her classmate Kanae-san spoke, as she walked along the guardrail.

Today was a Volunteer club work day, so after school they were heading for the public library. They were going to read picture books to the children gathered there.

“Absolutely, she must have a gentle personality; an obedient girl would be nice. Someone who can be lead and still be proud, with a cute appearance.” Yasuko laughed.

“Proud” and attractive like her classmate Mizuno Youko, but on the day she was made soeur, nervous, she decided. Well, in the case of Mizuno Youko-san she probably didn’t have to be nervous, since she was naturally graced with intelligence and beauty. And, as *Rosa Chinensis en bouton*, she was a leading candidate for *Rosa Chinensis*, something that any possible soeur would have to take into account. That would be very serious.

“Our club kouhai are ordinary, but our club activities are plain and we don’t get many new members.” Kanae-san murmured. She was a colleague of Yasuko’s in that she also wanted a soeur, but had not yet fortuitously met with anyone.

“The Tennis club seems to get a lot of people to join.”

“I hear you. That’s why it’s like first come, first served.”

The two lowered their voices. Because there were many club members around, they could have been seen easily. If someone saw them, rumors could get around and be passed on to the club members. The Tennis club was always in an age of flourishing. Jealous feelings, even if they weren’t really, could become a rumor.

“So, Yasuko-san, did you have something you wanted to say?” Kanae-san inquired like she was searching.

“Nothing tangible about a certain student joining, but...” Yasuko muttered as she untangled her dryer-damaged hair.

“If nothing tangible, then what about something vague?” Seemingly unconcerned, Kanae snapped strangely at these words. Yasuko smiled bitterly.

“Don’t get your hopes up. There’s no reasonable expectation in this conversation.”

The truth was, that Yasuko had been thinking “this girl would be good” for a while. It was a girl with whom she rode together every day on the train, parting when they reached Lillian, since she wore a Lillian Middle School Uniform. Every morning she got on before Yasuko, took the same seat, and read a book. That might be a textbook, or a novel or a game cheats book.

Yasuko, from a place slight apart, would hold onto a handrail and watch her as the train shook. Her hair, which was just slightly past her shoulders, was silky. Sometimes it would fall gently over her shoulders and she would brush it back behind her ears, a gesture she liked.

Ever since she had become a second-year, she had wanted this girl as her soeur. Thinking about this, Yasuko had followed her off the train. Just, only that.

However, as soon as Yasuko had become a second-year, that girl had suddenly disappeared. No, “disappeared” was probably the wrong expression. Yasuko rode the same train car as usual, but the girl was nowhere to be seen.

Because it was a new school term, there was always the possibility that she had entered and was now commuting to another school. One could also imagine a change of residence, or a different means of commuting.

At any rate, on that same car, in that same seat, now sat a fat old man. Yasuko’s meager daily routine was proof that she was not there.

Yasuko and Kanae had reached the public library slightly before the arranged meeting time, so they had not gone to the children's reading corner, but went into the regular reading room to pass the time. They were only reading a picture book today, there was no need for a rehearsal at this point. More important were fresh bookshelves that were not the school library's.

The Lillian Academy High School library was fairly complete but, of course, teenaged girls will gather under the pretense of utilizing the collection. To that end, the public library was large, deep, severe and gentle, each genre treated impartially itemized, which was stimulating.

And so were the users. Children lead by their mothers, young men who were taking notes from reference books as they studied for college, old women studying the knitting books carefully, suit-wearing company employees...

And then Yasuko's heart leapt.

Writing something, a little apart from a pile on one of the desks, she spotted "that girl."

It was the same posture as she had when sitting in the train seat reading, turning the pages of a thick book with zeal. She wasn't wearing the usual private school uniform, instead she had on a white blouse, a blue floral patterned skirt and a cream-colored cardigan.

"What's happened? I was worried." Yasuko controlled an impulse to rush over and call out to her. Why, because even if she was right in front of her, she didn't know anything about Yasuko. If she all of a sudden started speaking to her as if they were close, surely she'd be surprised. She would probably think that she was a weird person.

However, what was the right thing to do?

Yasuko didn't know. If they were separated now, she might never meet her again.

“What’s the matter, Yasuko-san?”

“I’m sorry. Uh, just a sec.” When her heart began to pound violently, Yasuko rushed to the bathroom. Although she did not return, the sickness in her heart did not stop.

Eventually, it became Yasuko’s turn to read out loud, so Kanae undertook to do the whole thing.

Yasuko was barely able to sit next to Kanae-san in the children’s corner. Her heart flew to the general reading room. As she left, what if she just took the seat next to the girl...., she thought, as a cold sweat began to flow.

“I investigated her.” The day after, Kanae-san said in the classroom. “Hayashi Asaka-san, fifteen. Her apartment building is around 50 meters from that library. They say she lives with both parents. It’s in the vicinity, so apparently she has used that library as if it were in her own house, since she was small.

Make no mistake, that was the profile of the girl in the reading room yesterday.

“Why?” Yasuko asked in return, dumbfounded. Kanae-san was not a detective, so she must have used a trick to learn so much in such a short time. To start with, why did she think that that girl ought to be investigated?

The disclosure of the trick was simple.

“You didn’t tell me why you ran to the toilet when we were in the library. Therefore, when you secluded yourself suddenly, I slipped out and did some meddling. I casually asked the librarians.”

“And they told you?” She asked, surprised, to which Kanae-san said, “No,” and shook her head.

“Confidentiality. But, in order to ask directly, I walked over and introduced myself.”

“Then?”

“Of course, I asked her directly. So she gave me her name and contact information.”

“It was that easy?” Even assuming that a young woman was congenial, was it likely that when a stranger came up to her and spoke, that she would give out her personal information?

“Look, we were wearing our uniforms yesterday, right? That was my identification papers. If we were students at the same school, that would dispel any wariness.”

“Same school...?”

“It’s great, Yasuko-san. She’s a first year in the high school. She doesn’t have an onee-sama yet, she said.”

“Eh.”

“Be happier,” Kanae-san chuckled. “Because maybe you can make her your soeur.”

“Sœur...” Yasuko muttered.

“That’s right, soeur.” Kanae-san nodded, gradually understanding her true feelings.

Make that girl her soeur.

As if it might make this dream conversation come to pass, Yasuko mumbled the word “soeur” over and over.

Kanae-san’s “Meddling” came with after-sales service. She was on the boat, setting the table for a meeting with Hayashi Asaka.

In front of the stature of Mary, Yasuko put her rosary around Asaka’s neck. That day, Asaka became a member of the Volunteer club.

However.

“Eh?”

They were chatting after the monthly meeting of the Volunteer Club, when she wasn't sure she had heard the words Asaka had said.

“I commute to school on foot. Because my middle school was a local public school, and I didn't commute by bus or train, I always admired those with a month pass.”

“Asaka-chan. That's a good thing,” said Yasuko's onee-sama, lifting a finger.

“It is?”

“Crowded trains are tight.”

“But, if it was with Onee-sama, it would be fun...I think. Always having to go home not together, it's a little lonely.”

“Well, have fun.” The third-years raised their voices laughing.

When the conversation had ended, Kanae-san said “Can I have a sec,” and lead Yasuko outside the clubhouse.

“What was that?”

“I mistook her for another person, it seems.” Yasuko answered.

“Sheesh-“ Kanae-san brought both hands up and clapped them on the sides of her head. Because she was the one that got the two of them together.

“But you know, Kanae-san, I really do think that Asaka is cute. For that, I am really grateful to you. Now, though, I'm thinking about talking to that other girl about being soeur. Please, don't tell Asaka.”

“...Right.” Kanae-san nodded. Saying anything would hurt Asaka most likely, she realized.

“If that girl on the train is a student of ours, it might take some clever conversation. Until it’s that girl’s turn, take great care with Asaka.”

“Yes, I intend to.” Yasuko nodded. From her heart, that was what she thought.

The opportunity for that “clever conversation” existed somewhere surely. Only, Yasuko never noticed it.

After a month had passed since Yasuko took Asaka as a soeur, saw her in their usual car on the train.

She was sitting in a seat reading a book of hymns. That wasn’t all. She wasn’t wearing a Lillian Jogakuen uniform, was she?

For a second, half in jest, she imagined Asaka, who admired being able to take the train, had gotten on somewhere. However, she really didn’t expect Asaka to have done that. Unless she was able to calculate when Yasuko always got on the train, which didn’t seem likely.

That was when she really got a direct look at the girl.

It was not Asaka.

With her eyes cast down, there was some resemblance. When she looked straight at her face, it was a completely different person.

“Good day.” The girl stood up and said, coloring a little. M station, which they were approaching, was her home stop.

“Why?” Yasuko returned the greeting by asking the girl.

“Yes. I attended a middle school that was integrated with a high school, however I undertook to go to Lillian. My previous school did not have a university, and it was further from home so I gave up hope.”

“Did you change trains?”

“Just before the new semester ceremony a classmate of mine hurt her leg. My house is the closest to hers, so for a little while we went to school together. She was on crutches, so doing things like carrying a bag was difficult... Many Lillian students commute by train so it was only for a little while. But, yesterday she no longer had to use the crutches, so my duty was over.”

“I see.” She resented the girl with the wounded leg unreasonably, Yasuko had to admit. If that girl had not been hurt, they might have had a meeting like this two months ago, in April.

The girl’s name was Han Masumi. Yasuko told her her name and class also.

“Onee-sama.” When they came down out of the North Exit of M Station, why was Asaka there?

“Oh, Masumi-san. Good day. ...You two are acquaintances?”

Yasuko and Masumi-san shared a glance when she asked this.

Could you really call it acquaintance? Today was the first time they had shared a word.

“It seems that every once in a while we ride the same train, so we greeted each other on the way home. Then, we came here while talking.” Masumi’s explanation was not incorrect. It just omitted the earlier conversation.

“Well, it’s a small world, huh.” Asaka introduced “My classmate Masumi-san” and “And, this is Shirakawa Yasuko,” she continued.

“This is the onee-sama you boast about Asaka-san, huh.” Masumi said, before it was explained that they were soeur. “As previously rumored. A fateful meeting at the public library.”

“No way, come on, Masumi-san.” Asaka’s face went red, she slapped Masumi on the shoulder.

As she watched this, Yasuko did not feel good about it, so she kept her mouth shut.

“Why is Asaka here?”

“I just felt like commuting to school by bus.” Asaka said lightly, taking Yasuko’s arm.

“Well, then. Looks like I’d be interrupting.” Masumi said, smiling, so she walked ahead of them. The urge to run after her did not rise. Instead, she was relieved that she was gone.

“I hope you didn’t spread that strange story.”

“Strange story?”

“The fateful meeting, you know.”

“Ah, that wasn’t me. It was a rumor that my classmate was telling anyone who would listen.”

Still, at least one person had to have been a “gossip” for Asaka to have heard it before. Saw her in the library, fell in love, became soeur, etc.

“But, because it’s not really a rumor, it’s okay, right?”

“....I guess so.” Asaka clung heavily to her left arm.

Masumi

She knew about that person from early on.

For the year of her third year in middle school, Masumi was aware of that girl on the train.

She watched from the side, holding the same handrail as always. Of course, not that she thought that way, it might just be a convenient circumstance. She might have been looking at the glass window behind her, watching the changing scenery.

Still, every time she looked up, she met that girl's eyes. Therefore, as soon as they came close to the girl's station, she took a book out of her bag.

On the way home from the station, she stood in the same place. It was near the stairs, so when the arrival chime sounded, signaling that they had reached home at last, she could fly out the open door, was how she saw it.

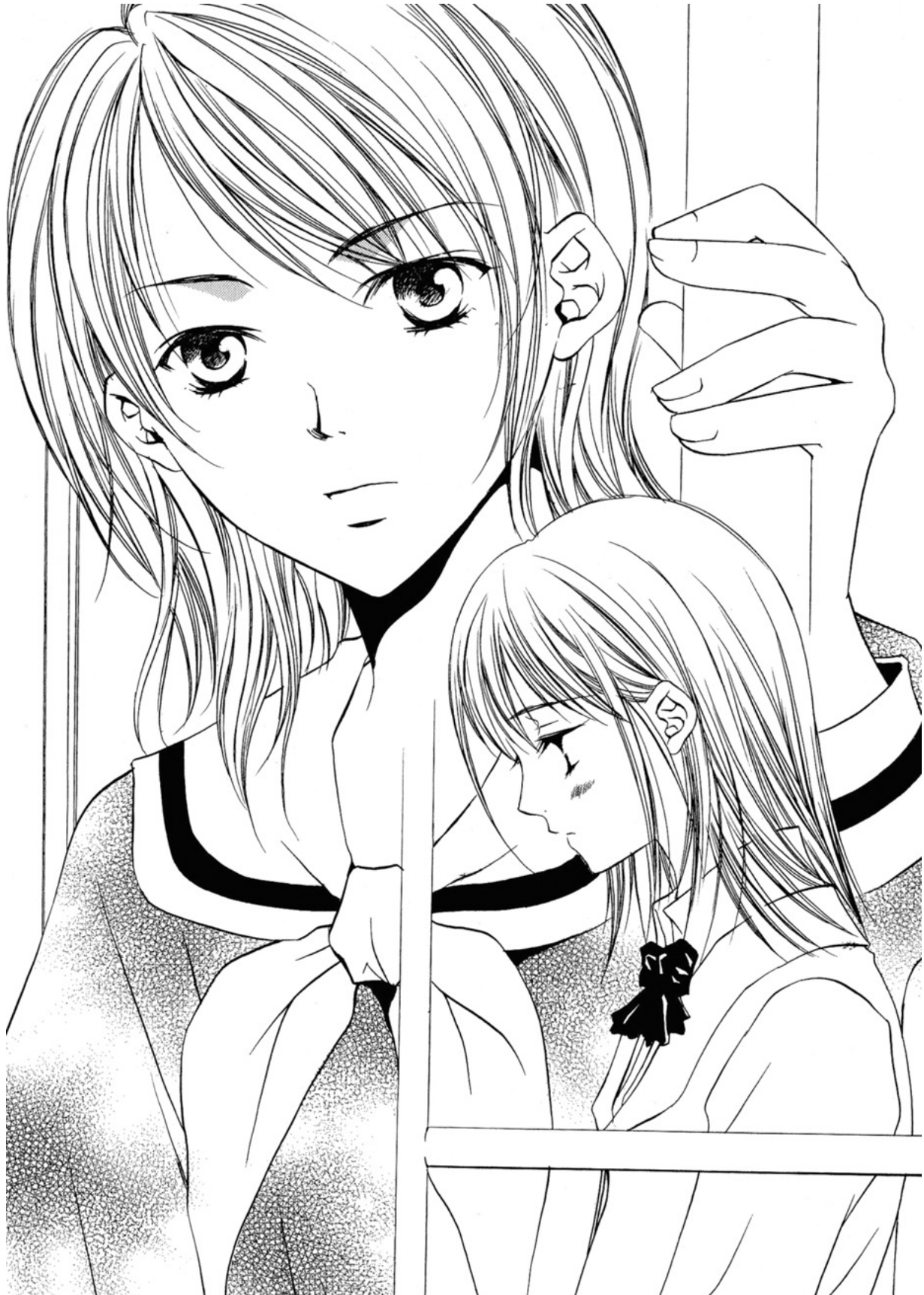
And for that same space of time, Masumi kept her eyes down on the book. Despite her concentration on any given day, the contents never entered her head.

Once she saw the girl off at M station, with a relieved, not unsatisfied feeling, Masumi would ride the shaking train to the station nearest the school.

As she sat and rocked, she would always think.

What was this feeling?

She didn't know her name. She didn't know her age. All she knew was that she always took the train from the station to Lillian Jogakuen. That's it.





However, did she really need to know more than that? They were two people who passed time every morning in the same train. That's it.

Was that it, really? Every day Masumi's thoughts progressed little by little.

Certainly, it was "this relationship, that's all" for her. Whether or not she could apply it to herself, that was another thing. Just, from the time the door opened and she confirmed that it was her, during the entire time they passed together, she considered the girl's existence, watching her from behind. She seemed to have feelings that were not contained in "this relationship, that's all."

That girl wasn't the only one that rode the same train as her every morning. The salaryman who sat in the seat next to her, the OL that sat across from her, they were unconditional.

However, the only one that interested her was that person.

Maybe it was the Lillian school uniform? Thinking about that, Masumi thought it was close to the answer. When she imagined herself in a Lillian uniform her heart raced.

When it became autumn, Masumi began studying for exams for a school that was attached to a high school. She squeezed into Lillian Jogakuen.

It became spring, Masumi was wrapped in Lillian's pure uniform, it was the day of the New Term Ceremony and as usual, she got on the train a little early. She had time since it was the very first day, but she made herself the excuse that she wanted her uniform figure to be seen by that person.

If it were just some strange girl in a uniform, she probably wouldn't remember a thing but, since it was the same Lillian uniform, maybe she might say "Hey," and become interested. She herself has a sense of incompatibility, since on the other hand she didn't want to expose herself, Masumi thought. If she waited until she became used to this uniform, like any part of her body, she wouldn't have the courage to step out in front of that person.

Masumi sent a message to heaven that, at the entrance ceremony, the homeroom teacher quickly assign her some work to do. And then, a classmate hurt her leg during spring break and she was able to provide support on the school commute. That girl, Tsukiyama Minako-san, and Masumi's house were technically separated by a town border line and in that sense were distant, but in a straight line were about a hundred meters apart.

"Sorry about this, so soon after the entrance ceremony," Minako-san said, while on crutches. "You having to say no to various club activities."

"It's fine, really. There are no clubs I want to join anyway. Any that I'd want to join, I could join any time, I think. There aren't that many clubs that you can't join midway right?"

"But, if you want an onee-sama, it's better to get in early. It would be troublesome if Masumi-san didn't meet her fated onee-sama because of me."

"No way."

She hadn't ever really thought about the onee-sama thing. But, when she heard "onee-sama" something popped into her mind. That thing was that person's face.

"So, don't let me hold you back."

"But, it will be hard for you to go home alone."

"This is bad. You coming with me to and from school. For a little while, since you've decided, thank you for kindness."

Because that was the way Minako-san was, they had quickly become friends. When she had moved up from middle school, she knew a lot about the school, so she had taught Masumi, who had come from another school, many things.

In the morning, if you looked forward through to the train cars in front, there were many Lillian students; because she was a little embarrassed to meet that person, it was okay that she was away from her usual train car.

The uniform, which seemed a borrowed thing, sooner or later became familiar to the skin, and the greeting “Good day,” too, putting one’s hands together in front of Maria-sama became natural, and Minako-san, able to walk without crutches, said “Thank you” to Masumi and gave her a very pretty handkerchief, when she was liberated from the work of holding her bag.

As soon as Minako-san no longer needed assistance, she immersed herself in the activities of her club. It was the Newspaper club.

Then, since she did not need to be with Minako-san, Masumi rode her usual car for the first time in a while. Was the person there? They never passed each other in school. Maybe she had graduated?

However, she was there.

Although she had been riding train cars crammed full of Lillian students for two months, and had gotten used to seeing that uniform everywhere in the school, the absolute truth was that she still could not look at the person calmly.

She felt admiration for the Lillian school uniform. Perhaps, now that she wore the same uniform, the feeling that she felt was merely wanting to go to the same school.

Shirakawa Yasuko.

The name she introduced herself with was kept as something precious in Masumi’s heart. She learned she was a second-year student, and something swelled within her, unrestrained. However, as she left the station, that hope withered.

“Onee-sama.” Hayashi Asuka, from the same class as she, came running up to Yasuko-sama, waving.

Asaka-san had fallen for her at their first conversation outside school, she had heard from Minako-san.

Asaka-san introduced the two of them. It was revealed that they had already introduced themselves, that that wasn't necessary and with a light greeting, they parted.

No, Masumi ran away.

Watching Yasuko-sama and Asaka-san's relationship while on the swaying bus on the way to school. She didn't think that she would be able to endure that at all.

Rather, she thought about changing the train car that she rode. On second thought, she wanted to do no such thing.

She understood clearly from the moment of Asaka-san's appearance. Masumi did not want to commute to Lillian Jogakuen with her. She did not want to become Shirakawa Yasuko's soeur.

After a week or so of traveling to school two cars behind, on that day, the figure that had not been there in the car was seen.

"Why?" Yasuko-sama had said, standing next to her.

"Are you worried?"

With only those words, she understood what it was that Yasuko-sama wanted to say. However, until Masumi knew how to answer, she would remain silent.

Why did you change the car you rode? Because that made meeting with Yasuko-sama hard.

But in regards to are you worried about Asaka-san, that she didn't know how to answer.

On that day, when Asaka-san, walking on foot, had come to meet her at M station, something had changed.

Yasuko-sama's soeur was Asaka-san, so why did she say she didn't want to be Yasuko-sama's soeur.

The doors of the M station opened, and from behind Masumi Yasuko-sama spoke. "Since you don't want to see me, I'll be changing train cars."

In that case, they would be separated, which might perhaps be better. However, Masumi grabbed Yasuko-sama's arm.

"Please don't change."

"Eh?"

"I won't change either. Therefore—"

Therefore.

And so, the two of them began their secret affair.

Every morning, Yasuko-sama would get on the train car that Masumi was riding. When Yasuko-sama arrived, she would hand her bag to Masumi, and the two would talk, spending the time until the station gazing at each other.

From the station was the bus.

They would embark together, but hardly a word passed between them. If either of them had classmates riding on that, they would separate naturally and speak with them. Even if they didn't meet an acquaintance, when they got off the bus, they would walk a little separate from one another.

They did not consult with one another. During their time together, it was a rule that seemed natural. Masumi was happy enough with that.

Even when it became summer vacation, she did not feel lonely. Yasuko-sama was equally not able to go to school.

Speaking of summer vacation, until last year, when she was liberated from studies, it was a dream period when, as long as she finished her homework every day, she was free to do whatever she wished. Stay over her

grandparent's house for a long time, watch several movies in succession, spend a whole day in the pool.

However, this year, no matter what she did, her heart wasn't in it. She wondered where, what was Yasuko-sama doing about now.

A visit to a senior citizen's home, reading books in a children's hospital ward, taking a course in sign language, or maybe she was helping to clean up the public park. Summer vacation notwithstanding, those would be Volunteer club-like activities. Even though at the same time she had made the pledge to be soeur, Asaka-san had entered the Volunteer Club, maybe she was not participating in these activities.

Masumi thought about what it might be like if she had become a little sister. Just like Asaka-san, she would surely have followed her onee-sama and have joined the Volunteer Club, doing activities together with her, no doubt.

When she thought about it that way, she unbearably envied Asaka-san. She totally wanted to be in the position that girl was in, she thought.

However, it is meaningless to envy others. Because the truth was, Masumi could not replace Asaka-san, no matter how much she wished for it.

Lonely, lonely. Still, she did not call her on the phone.

If she called, what on earth would she say?

If it were her soeur Asaka-san, she could probably call with nothing particular in mind. However, she wasn't in such a position.

In the morning, the two of them rode the train together. There was no name for a relationship like that.

On the afternoon of the day that she heard that the Volunteer Club had an activity, Masumi finally came to M station.

Using the same train. Since that was all that connected the two of them, in her heart she prayed silently, as people came and went and were seen off through the ticket barrier.

Checking with her wristwatch, it was just about one o'clock. However, the time she was waiting wasn't wasted. The time she was waiting was wholly consecrated to Yasuko-sama. Each and every second felt as if it were precious.

Before long Yasuko-sama's form appeared at the top of the North Exit stairs. And, when she saw Masumi, she stopped where she stood, her mouth open a little.

She had completely understood, even from the distance.

The complete truth.⁶

(E: This word is "masumi," written in hiragana, not in the Kanji for Masumi's name.)

Masumi nodded. And then, she ran. From the ticket gate on the left edge to the ticket gate on the right edge. Thrusting the waves of people aside.

Yasuko-sama also ran. Toward the ticket examination and Masumi.

The two of them didn't see their surroundings at all. After a moment, as their extended their hands to touch one another, the ticker barrier prevented it.

"It's no good, you didn't put in a ticket or commuter card." The station attendant said with a smile, his words completely dragging them down from heaven, Masumi felt.

That day, Yasuko-sama had come to M station to buy a pendant in the station building. The teardrop-shaped glass beads with which the show window were decorated were beautiful, and while they were looking at them, she made a present of them. It was an inexpensive item but, she was happy. Although she was happy, she did not smile and say "Thank you very much."

This was the rosary that Masumi took. Therefore, as she thought about the issue with Asaka-san, her chest hurt.

Yasuko-sama also did not smile. The two of them, as they rode the train home together, held each other's hand tightly in silence. The two of them shared this crime.

Masumi came to hate school events. Because when it came to school events, soeur would often act as a unit. The Hakama race during the Sports festival, wandering the school during the School Festival. Being by herself wasn't painful. Yasuko-sama and Asaka-san as soeur, it became ever more unpleasant as she encountered it.

Christmas was coming; Asaka-san brought a ball of wool yarn to school. It seemed that she was knitting a scarf for Onee-sama. It wasn't only Asaka-san who was knitting. Classmates who had onee-sama were beginning to make small articles as previously arranged.

"Masumi-san, why don't you make something too?" Asaka-san said one day at break, to lessen Masumi's boredom.

"But, I don't have anyone to give it to."

"If that's the case, keep it for yourself."

In reality, she did have someone to give it to. However, she would be sure not to hand it over to Yasuko-sama before Asaka-san gave hers.

"Keeping it for myself seems kind of lonely." Masumi shook her head and stood. She looked hatefully at Asaka-san who did not know anything. "May I give it to your onee-sama?" Before those words could fly from her mouth, she retreated.

Heading to the bathroom, shaking, she kept looking over her shoulder, trying to remember with all her might how many pairs of eyes watched while she and Asaka-san had spoken.

When Christmas was over, she could not relax; Valentine's Day occurred.

Where a scarf was impossible, chocolate that had not reached the mouth was forgivable. In the world, the concept of obligatory chocolate exists.

Today after school. “Won’t you come to the old greenhouse?”

Masumi inquired while on the train. Yasuko-sama, who of course understood what was meant, said, “I understand,” and nodded.

She could have handed it over on the train, but she didn’t like that. She didn’t have the luxury of doing it in front of the statue of Mary. Any corner was fine. She didn’t know why, but Masumi wanted to hand the chocolate over in school.

Asaka

Really, from way back, Asaka knew. About the relationship Onee-sama had with her classmate.

*

I first saw the two of them together, when I ambushed them at M station. But, at the time, I didn’t realize the nature of it.

Friends who ride the same train car. Certainly, at the time, that was what I thought of the relationship. Because right after Masumi-san had entered the school, she had accompanied Minako-san on her commute, so there shouldn’t have been a chance to develop an intimacy with a strange upperclassman.

However, when was it? Asaka began to have a feeling. In Onee-sama’s heart, someone other than herself lived.

Since they had taken the pledge of being sisters, Onee-sama had always been kind. No, she seemed to be increasingly gentle to her face. But, every once in a while, when she caught a glimpse of Onee-sama’s face from the side, Asaka hesitated to say anything, for fear of rejection. She looked as if she were thinking about someone else, but who.

I first became aware of it just before summer vacation. Asaka had been on the edge of chatting with a classmate, when Onee-sama's expression became cloudy. "So it's Masumi-san," I said after that.

This happened too.

"So, Hayashi, behind Tsukiyama, you translate now."

"Ah, I'm not Hayashi, I'm Han."

Lifting his head, the teacher looked at Masumi-san properly.

"No, I'm sorry. You're similar."

At the time, she interpreted that to refer simply refer to our names. Hayashi and Han. Both were one character, our seat numbers were one after the other.

However, shortly after that, Masumi-san cut her hair. Maybe it was just chance. However, it was probably at that time that a small kernel of doubt grew in Asaka's heart.

She knew that, for a while during middle school, while attending a different school, Masumi had taken the same train line.

Therefore, there was, wasn't there.

It was strange.

Should she find out if that was the point of contact and why Yasuko-sama had chosen Asaka to be her soeur?

Neither of them were what you'd call an episode. Thinking about everything that might bind them would be foolish.

But, one after another, there were small episodes with Masumi-san, that in passing, caught Asaka's attention, falling in front of her and rolling underfoot. As her conviction piled up, Asaka felt herself stirring.

Test it, whether next to her in Onee-sama's head stood Masumi-san. Just so, even more than an answer this would give her the piece of the puzzle she needed.

One day after school in autumn, she saw Onee-sama stop and loiter in the courtyard. Onee-sama was looking up silently at the second floor windows. There stood a lone girl staring down just as silently. It was Masumi-san.

It was a beautiful scene, like a scene from a Shakespeare tragedy that she remembered. In the story, tragic lovers were ripped apart by their families. The two didn't notice Asaka looking at from a different building across the courtyard and, after about five minutes, they separated. To Asaka, those five minutes were like an hour, or two.

It wasn't that Onee-sama liked Masumi more than her, did she—? While harboring distrust, Asaka wasn't able to confirm it herself. If questioned closely or rebuked for her faithlessness, Onee-sama might be made to separate completely from Masumi-san. But if that happened, her relationship to Onee-sama could not remain as it was now.

A person who has never fallen does not know what that experience feels like.

Asaka did not want to be the sensible little sister and get out of the way, or scold like a Buddha of wisdom.

Why, if had it been like this at the beginning, would she have become her Onee-sama?

If she liked someone else, why did she lower her head and say, "I want you to become my soeur"? A little, not totally, as if she would cry. But if that had happened, Asaka would surely have forgiven her. Onee-sama looked to be speaking good faith then. And if she had come to like someone other than her, Asaka would still love Onee-sama.

However, Onee-sama never said a thing. At Christmas, she accepted Asaka's unevenly knitted muffler, and in return gave her a cute pouch decorated with beads in a floral pattern.

Asaka put lip cream and hand cream in the pouch, and carried it to school every day. She was not trying to flaunt it but, it seemed to be reflected in Masumi's eyes.

What is it about you that you are Yasuko-sama's little sister, was the appeal she did not make, but the feelings reached her. Though she didn't like herself, Asaka was never able to say anything.

And then, Valentine's Day.

Asaka made her onee-sama chocolates, just like a little sister. Instead of almonds, she put chocolate covered roasted coffee beans. A slightly bitter, sweet, painful taste.

At lunch, she waited her turn to hand it over in front of the statue of Mary. It was a soeur's privilege and Asaka had asked to.

Onee-sama had heard her request. That was, perhaps, because she had guilty feelings. However, Asaka worried, she pretended to perform the part of the innocent soeur. Unless Onee-sama put an end to it, she would not fall from that duty. As more and more time passed, that became a soiled duty.

It hurt.

Suspecting her beloved Onee-sama, and observing her classmate. If there was ever a person who wanted to like, she was it.

That day, inside the shopping bag Masumi-san held were chocolates. She didn't confirm it, but she knew. Asaka watched Masumi-san very closely then.

When would she give them? If she was worried, it might be after school.

Just when she thought she was going to go home after failing to give them, Masumi-san grasped the bag in her hand and left the classroom.

“Ah-“.

As she ran after her, Minako-san flashed her dust cloth and asked Asaka to stop.

“Asaka-san, you’re on day duty today right?”

“Ah...yes.”

Masumi-san was still within the bounds of the cleaning area. However, when cleaning was over, she would go to Yasuko, there was no mistaking it.

Asaka finished cleaning quickly, then peeped into Onee-sama’s classroom.

Onee-sama was emptying a dustpan into the garbage. It didn’t look like Masumi had come. Even if she waited here, she had not given her chocolate.

She was not able to observe outside the school building. But she wouldn’t want the chocolate being given inside the building. Because in here was her soeur, Asaka.

Without noticing her standing by the front classroom door, Onee-sama left by the back door and went out into the hallway. Because she never looked over her shoulder, she didn’t see Asaka standing there.

After a moment, she followed behind. There was no mistake; she was going to meet up with Masumi-san. If the chocolate was handed over in front of the statue of Mary, she would not forgive it. So her heart murmured.

But the direction Onee-sama took was in the opposite direction. Taking the hall on the edge of the school, she went down to the central grounds. Separated by a little distance, Asaka also went. Because today was Valentine’s Day, there were many students left in the school, so it was relatively easy to tail her.

Passing behind the school, she steadily progressed. Ahead was the Kendo training hall. They passed along the path to the rear gates.

Halfway, Onee-sama went into the old greenhouse. From outside looking in as much as possible, a single form was visible. Masumi-san hadn’t come

yet.

Asaka slowly retraced her steps back to the entrance to this path. From the greenhouse, she could not be seen here. And, if someone was coming from the school buildings to the greenhouse, there was no way they could avoid this spot.

Would Masumi-san come?

Asaka wanted her to come and didn't want her to come, and didn't quite understand her own feelings. But, she would not leave this place without confirming it. Those two could not run away.

She saw some students leaving by the back gate. Ten minutes, then twenty passed.

Maybe she wasn't coming? Maybe no promise had been made? Just as she began to think that, from the side of the school building, she could see a figure running.

Masumi-san.

As she suspected, her bad feeling had hit the mark.

Masumi-san, who was out of breath, when she saw Asaka standing there, quickly reduced her speed, then came to a complete halt in front of her.

"Good day." Asaka greeted her with a smile.

"G...good day."

"Has something happened? You're in such a hurry."

"Eh? No."

Masumi didn't commit herself. There was no way she was going to say that she was in a hurry because Yasuko-sama was waiting.

"You too, Asaka-san, why are you in this spot?"

“Me, I’m waiting to meet up with Onee-sama. Because she had things to do, some tidying up, she told me to wait here.”

If she thrust aside the soeur who said that and went to see Yasuko-sama anyway, Asaka might actually be impressed. However, Masumi-san did no such thing.

“I see.” That was all she said. She turned.

As if I was the one being unilaterally nasty, Asaka thought. However, she felt just as miserable. The one who wanted to cry was her.

As she saw Masumi-san go off, Asaka went inside the greenhouse.

“Asaka...”

If Onee-sama was surprised at the appearance of someone other than the one she was waiting for, Asaka threw away caring and stepped into the interior.

“I was looking for you.”

“What’s the matter?”

As she spoke, seating herself on one of the shelves, she could feel her stomach relax. It was better now that she didn’t have to pretend. Because there was no way Masumi-san would appear from behind now.

“The next time we go to the public library, I had an inspiration. I wanted to ask you quickly.”

“I understand. Well, why don’t we go to my classroom?”

“Onee-sama’s classroom?”

“It’s cold here and we can eat your chocolate as we talk.” Onee-sama gently put her arm around her shoulders, and Asaka quietly agreed with a nod.

“Yes.”

For how long would this be able to continue?

With her onee-sama's cold hand held in her own as they walked, Asaka thought of Masumi-san.

Where was she, was she watching the two of them, maybe? Or, was she in a corner of the school crying herself out?

Her feelings hidden, like the sweet chocolate, where would the three of them end up walking to?

It could continue for a long time, as long as no one upsets the balance. In spite of what people might think, the status quo was all right.

It might be a regrettable, it might leave a bitter feeling, nevertheless, "love" exceeds both all around.

When that was reversed, Asaka would be able to remove the rosary that hung around her neck.

When that might be she didn't know. Maybe tomorrow, six months from now, maybe a year, who knows.

Onee-sama looked up to the sky.

Asaka did the same, looking up to heaven, where all she saw was a cloudy sky.

In Library IV

“Ogasawara Sachiko-san? Yeah, she returned the book a long time ago.”

Down another branch of the forked road, behind the Loan Counter of the Library’s reading room, she laughed.

“Ah. Thirty minutes ago huh ... Sorry, I don’t remember exactly how long.”

Which one was which she did not know. One of the two was the “Secretly saw another person’s Onee-sama girl” , and the other was the “Threw the Rosary back girl”. Even when the two were in front of her, she could not believe that they had had such violent pasts.

“When was the book returned?”

Minako-sama bent down onto the counter and asked once more.

“Because there was a bit of confusion, I couldn’t deal with it right after it was dropped off. But the book was handed in, and I sorted it all out and input it into the computer soon after.”

The Library staffer looked over her shoulder. While at her work post, behind a pile of books, she had fortuitously spied the back cover of the book that Sachiko-sama had been reading.

“... Well, she came.”

Onee-sama doggedly fulfilled her first objective. Now she was expected to return to the Rose Mansion.

“Did you see Sachiko-san leave the reading room?”

She shook her head and said “No”.

“Oh yes. You were confused. So you couldn’t have noticed every person who had come and gone, right?”

“Probably. After that, she did not come back to borrow a book.”

Thank you, Minako-sama said, and bowed towards the counter. Then she turned towards Yumi.

“Sachiko-san had come only to return the book.”

“Huh.”

Yumi nodded without much thought. Doing so at this point made Yumi look suspicious. What with her having said “I’m off to the library!”.

“Because she came quite a while ago, it has probably been reshelfed but, let’s at least try to look for it in the reading room.”

After hearing Minako-sama’s plan, the two split up and would meet again in the middle of the room. It would be a good use of time while searching the wide reading room.

“The building will close in ten minutes.”

After hearing the Library Staffer’s announcement, Yumi checked her watch, and began walking along the wall. As she was walking, she began diligently inspecting the cracks between the books on the various bookshelves.

After an unknown time had passed, Yumi discovered those two again in an unsuspecting corner of the room.

Hugging the side of a bookshelf, Yumi saw the cuddled two reading a pamphlet with one picture spanning the current two pages. If things would have been different, Yumi would have wanted to watch from a distance but, now was not the time for that sort of thing. Yumi mentally apologized to them as she silently crept up behind the two Rosa Gigantea sisters and began to bother them.

“Excuse me, Shimako-san.”

“Oh, Yumi-san.”

“I apologize in advance, Yumi-sama.”

“Ah, no no, thank you.”

When Noriko had dipped her head towards Yumi, she dipped it down in return at Noriko. Dozing was a problem when the library was about to close.

“By the way, how long have you two been in here?”

“We came here right after we left the Rose Mansion. About how long it’s been, it’s been an hour it seems.”

Shimako-san made a shocked face as she looked at her watch. It’s as if the book had been some entrancing ghost.

Well anyway, they had been in the library for a long time, so maybe they knew in what direction Sachiko-sama had gone. As soon as it seemed that Yumi had started to talk, Shimako-san looked as if she were expecting a depressing question.

“Were you together with Sachiko-sama?”

“Uh....”

In her mad hope, Yumi had crumpled her skirt. Shimako-san quickly helped her fix it, so she would not have to put her butt on the floor.

“W... what’s wrong? Did I say something wrong?”

“No. Nothing wrong.”

Much time had passed from when she had dropped Sachiko-sama’s letter to the time that Sachiko-sama had come to return the book, so she explained her look of worry.

“Could it have been Touko?”

Noriko who had been silent and had only been listening up to now, quietly spoke.

“Earlier, I unexpectedly met up with Touko at the entrance to the reading room, and I told her that you were still in class after school. After that, she started exiting the room and looked back at me when she ran into Rosa Chinensis. They had gone on together into the Milk Hall. It could have been Touko.”

“No, that’s not what happened.”

At that time, rather than drinking strawberry milk with Sachiko-sama in the Milk Hall, Touko-chan had drunk black tea with Yumi at the Rose Mansion.

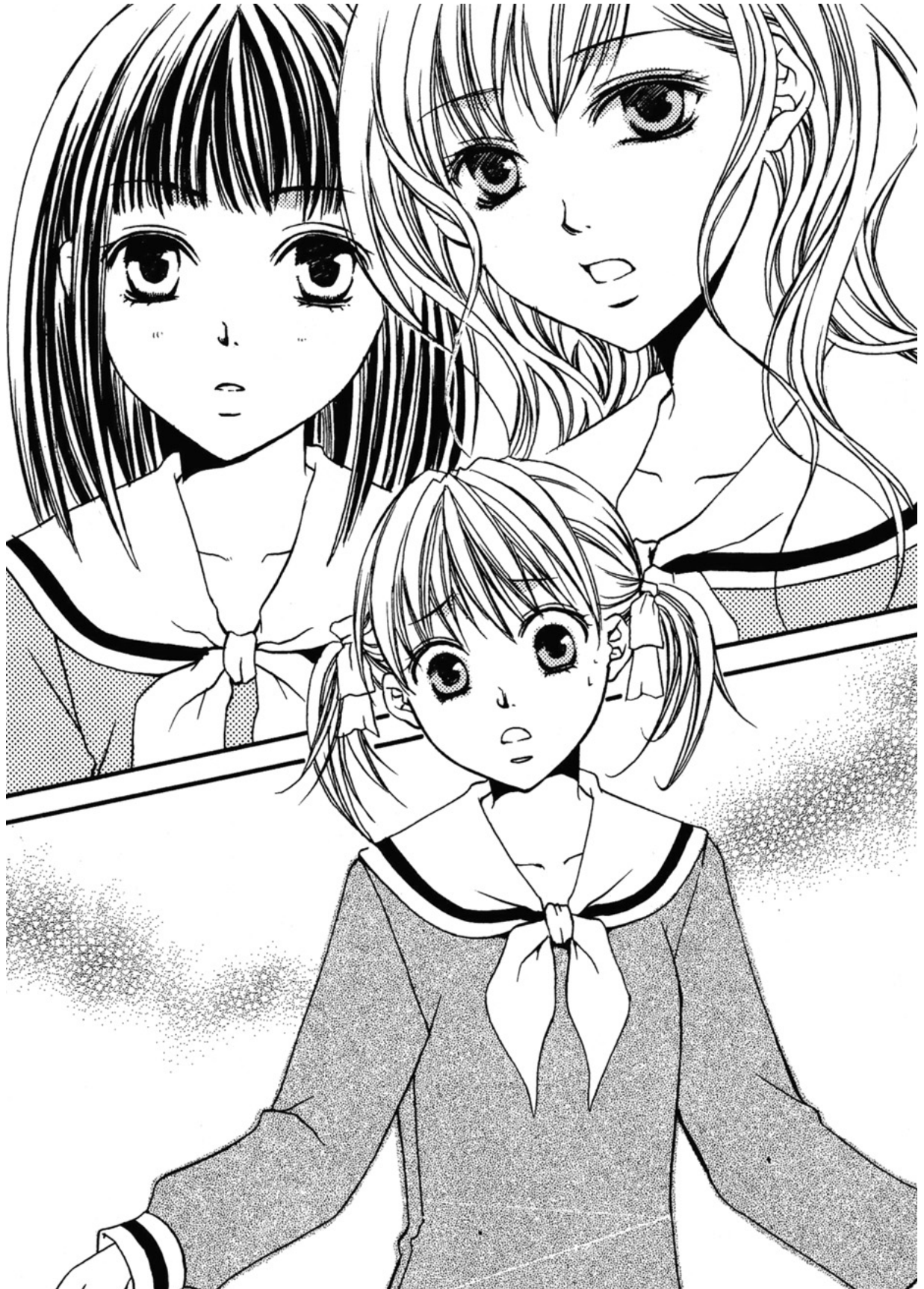
“Let’s search together.”

Shimako closed the pamphlet, and Noriko-chan nodded.

“Well, it’s not that big of a thing.”

“But the truth is, you don’t know where she went?”

No, it wasn’t that Yumi did not know where Sachiko-sama had gone, but it was that something had not been found.





“Perhaps she had unexpectedly returned to the Rosa Mansion.”

“Wouldn’t that have been nice.”

“But, you two had, with the book —”

“We had been reading books for a while, but we had seen Sachiko-sama before we started reading.”

What could she do? Making a big deal about being able to find Sachiko-sama, it would be best to just fix up the situation.

“Noriko, would you return that pamphlet please.”

“Sure.”

When Noriko returned the pamphlet into the bookshelf, Yumi suddenly spied the title.

“Sakura Folk Tales?”

“Yeah. If you read Sakuratei, you would find it real interesting. Because the two are part of the same story, this pamphlet isn’t very long. I had heard about it from someone in second-year Sakura class, and so I asked her about how she had gotten the book. She told me that she had won it as a gift in a lottery, but that, if I wanted to read it, I could probably find it at the library. So then I and Noriko came here to try to find it.”

Because Yumi had looked over Sakuratei once before, she understood. It resembled that book, but it was different.

“Oh yeah. That book is from this year, isn’t it?”

Shimako stroked the bookshelf that the pamphlet had been returned to while laughing. The books arranged on the shelf sometimes differed in size or the depth of color on them, but all of them were pamphlets with pink back covers.

“All of these books were written about the ‘Sakura class’s history?” Yumi was quite interested.

Yes, probably.

“Which page?”

Cherry Blossom Folk Tales

Cherry Blossom Classroom was the last building on the second floor of the Lillian Girls' Academy school building.

The door was made of wood, but was so darkened that nobody knew what sort of wood it was. But the students who used the classroom knew that it was actually made from the cherry blossom tree, they had kept the secret alive by passing it from sempai to kouhai.

If one looked inside through the gap in the door, one would see that it was now homeroom for Second Year Cherry Blossom Class.

On the blackboard, the words "Think about Sakuratei" were written in large letters. The School Festival Action Committee was in a heated meeting.

"Well then, after considering countless proposals, it has been decided to hold this year's Sakuratei as a café.

Sakuratei.

The name of a shop in the School Festival that Cherry Blossom Class viciously protects every year. It was a program that changed every year, but whose name was kept as Sakuratei. Last year, Sakuratei was a curry shop. Years before, it's been a soba store, a sweets shop, and years ago it had even been a small drama theater. This year's cafe would be like all the Sakuratei that came before it, well-established and popular, and would never be Sakuratei again for several years.

The decision had been a peaceful one, so the matter at hand was resolved ... or so I thought. Actually, the real issue was about to start.

"How about a music cafe? We could listen to a musical performance while sipping tea" The students of the Folk Song Club proposed.

"We agree" The Chorus and Ballad Club's leaders raised their hands.

“Um, we could decide on a showtime to catch, and some dance will probably be in the performance.” The Dance Club leader added on untimidly.

“Isn’t a music club a little too much? If we want to display our originality, maybe we should get rid of music altogether” The new voice to the discussion was the leader of the Go Club.

“To get rid of music is a bit over the top, is it not? Don’t tell me you want to put down a Go board and start a Go match?”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

And then the Shougi Club’s leader added her thoughts in. “Maybe adding a Shougi Board wouldn’t be too bad of an idea either.”

The winner for the Cherry Blossom was the café. New ideas had been proposed, but ... “Please stop this side talk. Until there is a clear winner, please do not leave your seats. It has been decided that the guests must stay in place”

“But music is the same thing.”

It seemed like everyone wanted to win with their own idea. From the beginning, students who did not have a very concrete idea of what was going on in the meeting took up heated positions. Because they continued to stir up conflict with each other, the room was descending into confusion.

A picture café (Proposed by the Arts Club), a Manga café (Proposed by the Manga Investigation Club), A Café with Flowers (Proposed by the Flower Arrangement Club), and on, and on. A Ping Pong Café (Proposed by the Ping Pong Club), a Sewing Café (Proposed by the Handicrafts Club), and all sorts of café ideas were popping up. Even the chairman of the meeting had to take a long sigh.

“I understand the meaning behind everyone’s requests. However, if each club continues to promote only its own opinion, we cannot reach consensus. How about this. Today’s meeting shall come to a close, and from tomorrow

onward, please meet with your representative, and appeal with them to present the idea. The School Festival Action Committee will probably settle the location at a café.”

It was a wise decision. Everyone had become very heated in their discussions, so a temporary cooling off would do us well. Plus there was always the possibility that after a good night’s sleep, people would wonder why they had proposed such absurd ideas. On the other hand, if they felt that their ideas had merit, sleep would only increase the idea’s appeal.

“I wonder if that’s a good idea.” The leader of the Literature Club who had held her patience and kept silent the whole time raised her hand. “If that’s the case, then hear my proposal out too.”

“A literature café Sakuratei?” Said someone, in a somewhat mocking tone.

“Yes. But I do not want this to be a place where only I can show off my club’s wares.”

“Then what do you mean?”

“I was thinking everyone could make things they could not have made were they not in Cherry Blossom-class, and then sell those in a store. That was all.”

The Literature Club President looked around at her classmates. “We’ll make presents ahead of time, and then everyone can make stories, songs, or essays about the Cherry Blossom-class Folk Tales, and collect them all together.”

“Cherry Blossom-class Folk Tales?”

“Yes. In the entire set of high school classes, there are six different classes. Why must there only exist a Cherry Blossom-class for second years? Or, looking at it the other way, why must the Plum Class found in the first and third year classes not also found in the second year classes?

Everyone should think about this.” As soon as she finished her answer, the room became noisy.

“Because this classroom’s door is the only door which uses Cherry Blossom trees for material?”

“Isn’t it because of the famous class teacher Sakura-Sensei?” People began voicing their thoughts from different corners of the room.

“Look now. Everyone knows one or two different folk tales right? Write words about it. Put your tales into writing.”

From the way the participants began talking, the air of the room seemed to project the idea as “Seems Interesting”. No matter how you looked at it, the young girls of the room liked this topic of conversation.

The Chairman looked down at her clock for time confirmation. “If anyone else has any other ideas, please express them now.”

When she took a survey glance around the room, she found no such people. “So then, this time next week, shall we decide to hold presentations?”

After confirming that everyone raised their hand in agreement to the idea, the chairman of the School Festival Action Committee turned back to us.

“That’s all teacher. Please return to homeroom instruction now.”

— Magic Among the Cherry Blossom —

Everywhere you looked, the mirrors opposed each other. A part of my shared heart called out to another. Because the cherry blossoms sway, and the flower petals fall. Had I recognized the signs sooner, I would have come even earlier.

“Shirayuki-san?”

Wondering what had happened, the students turned and looked back.

“No, it’s nothing. Sorry, let’s just go on ahead.”

Shirayuki-san had been tying her sailor collar as she stepped on the cherry blossom petals and followed the small group of students. Some time along the way, a ten-meter gap had opened up between them.

“Did something catch your eye?”

“Nope” she replied to her classmates, when they turned their heads around to listen to her answer. Something had interested her, but she had no idea how to talk about it. So she had tried to go back there, even though she knew she probably wouldn’t find an answer. As she was returning from morning prayer, just as she was exiting the church, it had felt like she was being called by someone, and she had stopped. That was all. But when she began looking around, she could not see anyone. There was only a cherry tree with a branch barely supporting a proudly growing cherry blossom.

“Shirayuki-san, again?”

“I wonder if she became intoxicated by the cherry blossoms?”

As the girls began shrilly laughing, Shirayuki-san laughed softly as well. Entranced by the cherry blossoms, huh. When she thought about it, it strangely fit her situation very well.

After she had returned to the second-year Plum Class classroom, Shirayuki couldn’t help but think about the voice that had called out at her. As the day wore on, the tale that she had kept in her heart began to grow, until by the time it had become 4th period, she neither took notes nor opened her textbook, but simply thought about that voice. Had she been intoxicated, it would have worn off by now.

At lunch, Shirayuki bounced back to the place, moving as if she were in a hurry. Without confirming whether she had been invited by something or

not, she could not go on any longer.

“Who are you?”

Shirayuki asked, as she came to the place where she had been called in the morning, and called back. And then.

“Who are you?”

As if there were an echo from the tree, a voice rang back. Shirayuki became dreamy and then began calling back.

“Where are you?”

“I am here?”

After the voice had whispered “Here”, she began looking around but, she found someone else. On the fat branch above her, she could see the face of a single girl, sitting. She was wearing a Lillian Uniform, but somewhere, it was different from Shirayuki’s.

“Who are you?”

This time, it was the other girl who asked.

“.... Shirayuki”

When their eyes met, she could not bring herself to stay silent.

“I see. I’m Shirotae.”

Shirotae laughed happily. Her brown, straight hair was as long as the branch she sat upon. The color of her skin was so light, that it seemed as if the colors of her surroundings would bleed into her. No, it didn’t just seem as if the colors bled in, they actually did. – Magic. Instantly, Shirayuki knew. That girl was not something of this world. Because a normal human would not let the color of the Cherry Blossoms bleed into their skin. Shirayuki began to run.

“Ah, Shirayuki?”

From behind her, Shirayuki heard Shirotae’s voice clearly. Maybe Shirotae herself didn’t know what she was? If people had paid attention, no one would have known where she had come from or why she had come in, but they would have noticed her enter the classroom.

“But why?”

Perhaps in response to a feeling she had felt, a classmate of Shirayuki’s closed the box of her lunchbox and ran to Shirayuki’s side.

“You don’t look well”

It was Momoyo-san. She always was very well versed in occult stuff like this.

“Right now, I, just uh, saw a ghost.”

“A ghost?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe it was some magic.”

Because she had said it so plainly, it sounded as if it could not be believed, but still Momoya-san listened from beginning to end to the tale without laughing. “Hm. I see.” She said, as she made sounds indicating that she was following the conversation. As I continued telling the tale, my heart slowly began returning to its normal pace.

“It’s not as stupid as you think it is,” said Shirayuki while looking at Momoyo-san, after having related the whole tale.

“Leaving an opening for a human. Weird”

But as always Shirayuki’s occult-loving friend did not laugh.

“Do you think it’s weird because you saw something like this before?”

“But.”

“Shirayuki-san.”

Another friend prompted, Shirayuki-san nodded and said “Yes”.

“Do you really believe what I’m saying?”

“If I thought you were lying, I wouldn’t have had any interest.”

The friend answered with a somber face.

“You know, in the morning, all of us were in that spot, but only Shirayuki-san noticed it. Also, she went back a second time, and this time she herself was called out for? That’s not a very good sign.”

“Not a very good sign?”

“Whether it was magic or whether it was a ghost, whether it was just a specter, or whether it was a demon, it wasn’t something natural, and associating with such things is always a danger. If you had mistaken her for someone in the crowd, wouldn’t you have remembered her face? Or if you had just bumped into someone, you would at least remember whether she spilled ice cream or something else on your clothes.”

“And then, wouldn’t that person say, ‘I’m sorry, here, let me give you something to help you clean the uniform’ and then present you some compensation from her purse?”

“I wouldn’t take it.”

“Exactly. Then she would say ‘Take it’ and you would probably say ‘I can’t’. Well anyway, whichever you pick, either way, you could tell that this person wasn’t someone you had seen earlier in the city.”

After Momoya-san pointed this out, Shirayuki’s back went cold.

“I wonder what she had wanted to say?”

“Will she remember that she had been talking to you?”

“If she does remember, what will you say?”

“Since I don’t know what she is, or what she wants, so I have no idea what I’d do. But I know I’d be careful.”

“Why?”

“I wouldn’t go back there. From what you told me, the girl had been sitting on the cherry branch, right? Maybe it was a personified spirit of the cherry blossom, or some sort of trapped soul in the tree, or something like that. If that had happened to me, I wouldn’t have been able to move. If I were you, I’d stay away from the place, and end this now.”

“But it’s within school grounds. There’s no way I can avoid her forever.”

“But it’s only while the cherry blossoms are blooming.”

“I wonder if I can do it....”

“You can. And if the girl calls out to you again, do not answer her. If she calls out several times and you ignore her, maybe she will think she mistook you for another person, and she won’t bother you again. It’s difficult but, I think it’s the best way to protect yourself.”

“I’ll try my best.”

When Shirayuki nodded, she thought that she really would follow Momoyasan’s advice. But after lunch, as fifth period and sixth period went by, she began to feel suffocated.

She could see the cherry blossom trees from the classroom window. It wasn’t the same tree from earlier, but different trees. As the wind blew into the branches, the petals fell with an audible sigh of “Shirayuki.”

Shirotae was calling her. The smile from when Shirotae had spoken her name aloud would not leave Shirayuki’s mind.

“Because we still have to decide on what to use for the School Festival, we shall meet again in the classroom after after-school cleaning is finished.”

The School Festival Action Committee raised their voices aloud. Because a decision had not been reached, no one was even allowed to go to their club activities, even though the festival was still half a year away. To outdo the other classes, this elite class would release a questionnaire of proposals for ideas for the festival.

As soon as the “yes” and “no”s stopped, each of the students went on to do their share of the cleaning. Shirayuki also left the classroom, with the wave of students leaving to clean. She had forgotten about her cleaning duty. Even then, her feet began moving on their own. She did not need to ask herself where she was going, because she knew there could be no other place but that one.

“Shirotae, did you call me?” As she stood in front of the cherry blossom tree and called out, the figure of Shirotae floated out from the tree’s branch.

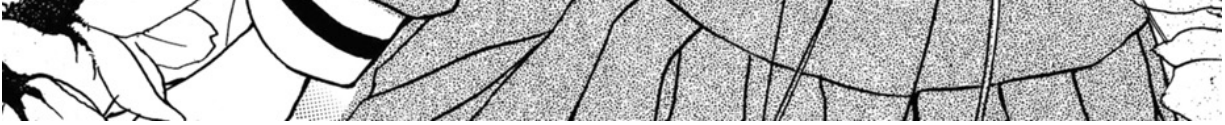
“I didn’t. You were the one who called me, right Shirayuki?”

Shirotae replied strangely.

“While you were in class, you shook the branches and called me. Shirotae, Shirotae. So I came out here.”

“Class? Did I leave class?”





“Yes. Because this isn’t a school.”

“— I see.”

Whether the apparition had taken away the school or not, Shirayuki had no idea. She could only laugh.

“I apologize. What are you laughing for?”

Because Shirayuki was so happy, she continued talking some more.

“So, which year and which class are you from, Shirotae?”

“Second year, Cherry Blossom Class.”

The magic that lived in the cherry blossom was called Cherry Blossom Class. Very cool.

“And you, Shirayuki?”

“I’m from second-year Plum Class.”

“In my school, there is no Plum Class.”

In her school, Shirotae began relating, there were Cherry Blossom Class, Wisteria Class, Chrysanthemum Class, Peach Class, Pine Class, and Camellia Class.

5 out of the 6 classes were the same each year, but for some reason, one of the classes was different. For some reason, Plum and Cherry Blossom had been switched.

“Second-year Plum class Shirayuki-san. You are not of this world. That’s why you look transparent.”

“You’re the transparent one.”

“Well then, our versions of ‘my world’ seem to be different then.”

“So is this cherry tree the limit then?”

Shirotae-san asked jokingly, but Shirayuki replied with a thoughtful “Maybe it is”.

If one thought about reality realistically, it was a perfectly nice thing to say. If one believes that there is but one world, and that one exists in it, then it’s not very sensible to think about other worlds.

It was simply a lie meant to confuse her. It was an easy conclusion, but.

“You aren’t magic?”

“I’m magic even though I’m holding a Rosary?”

Shirotae placed her hands on her collar and lifted the rosary off her neck. She put it in plain view in her hands, then presented it to Shirayuki.

Fleeting.

“Ahh!”

Both cried out at the same time.

It felt as if her whole body had been rammed with pain. A feverish pain came over her and paralyzed her, while at the same time, her mind went white. And for a moment, time stopped. In the next moment, a new shock came over her.

“Bump”

“Ouch....”

She realized that the sound she had heard was the sound of her body falling to the floor. The impact felt a bit weak, however, as she was soon able to figure out why. The cherry blossoms, which had fallen to the floor had acted as a cushion. She was covered in cherry blossom petals and dust, but she ignored them to look at her watch.

“Oh no, I’ll be late for the school festival.” As she began running, her indoor shoes hit something on the floor. It was the rosary, which had fallen earlier.

“Oh yeah.”

This was the rosary, which had fallen from the branch, she remembered. But she completely forgot about the other girl who had also been there. When she returned, Momoya-san stood angrily to greet her.

“You skipped cleaning duties huh? Where did you go? No, you couldn’t have ...”

“I didn’t. I was feeling a bit bad, so I rested in the toilet.”

“Ah, that’s good. You shouldn’t go back to that cherry tree again.”

“I know. I took Momoya-san’s advice to heart.”

“To heart – ?”

Momoya-san began asking her again because Shirayuki’s words felt suspicious, but then the School Festival Action Committee’s announcements began booming over their speech.

“Oh, Shirotae-san, you’re back? Now that everyone’s here, let the meeting begin.”

Second-year Cherry Blossom Class’s Entry.

“But, this used to be Plum class.”

Her classmates, thinking she referred to First Year Plum Class, began coldly laughing at her.

“For that matter, why is Cherry Blossom class only in the second year? Do you know?”

Shirayuki asked her neighboring classmate softly.

“Oh?”

Shirotae bent her head in question as she laughed. With her finger, she picked up a cherry blossom petal that had fallen on her shoulder.

In the middle of the second-year Cherry Blossom Classroom.

— The Door of Cherry Wood —

“Kasumi-saaan!”

After pushing back the bad door and hearing it’s screeching, the students entered the classroom.

“If you’re looking for Kasumi-san, she isn’t here.”

“Do you not know where she could be? Others had told me that they had wanted to talk to her about the daily log ... And she had just come through this door too.”

Opening it had been fine, but this time, it would not close. The aged tree used for the door had even had wax applied on the bottom to help it open.

“It seems like the inside has rotted, huh. Maybe it’s time to change the door.”

Declaring “Together”, the three girls closed the door. It had been only two weeks since they began studying here, but already they had become used to it.

“Well, about Kasumi-san. She had left without saying anything, so perhaps she went over there.”

“Ah, over there —”

Just as the students expected, she punched her fist into her other palm. That Kasumi-san would quickly leave during her free time was something everyone else had also gotten used to.

“I want to go meet her but, if I’m hesitating because I might bother her.”

“You’ll think of yourself as the “Meddler of Lovers” eh?”

“Well, different people like different things. Anyway —”

The students nodded in approval, and began looking out the windows.

“A lover’s meet amongst the plants. Sounds like fun, eh.”

The way my classmates and I looked at Kasumi-san, she was a little different.

If you looked at her, you wouldn’t find anything different. She looked like your average woman, and perhaps even a little cute. Her grades were good. Her social skills weren’t bad either. She was friendly with her classmates, and wasn’t ignored or hated by her classmates at all. But Kasumi-san had a very unordinary interest.

Kasumi-san loved a single cherry blossom tree that grew on the school grounds. You couldn’t really call that normal.

Every morning, if she had time, Kasumi-san would go up to the tree, stroke its bark, talk to it, and lean closely against it. At first, when we watched her do this, we were suspicious, but now that a year had passed, we simply look at her and say “Oh, she’s doing it again?”. Every day, unfailingly, unless it was the part of spring where the cherry blossoms bloomed, she would go to the tree and come close to it in the same way. There was nothing else to it, really.

Last year, when caterpillars would come out onto the leaves, she would go home to her mansion, bring along specially groomed shrubs, and around the area of the tree, she would spray pesticide. Because she hated using

chemicals, she would only bring natural chemicals with her, perhaps because the cherry blossom itself had said this. Students began spreading around exotic rumors. Anyway, to Kasumi-san, that cherry blossom tree was equal to a human; perhaps it received even more love than a human. So that Kasumi-san would stay happy, we would warmly watch over her.

But that one day, everything had changed.

That day, Kasumi-san had departed during lunch as always, but after one hour, she hadn't come back. We became worried, so we asked the teacher for permission to go look for her. This way, we wouldn't be marked as late for class.

We had a bad feeling about Kasumi-san. Then we discovered that next to the roots of the cherry blossom tree, Kasumi-san had fainted.

Kasumi-san was rushed to a hospital, but she continued to sleep. She had no outside damage, but there was no mistaking that she was ill. With what, though, we did not know.

In those days, when Kasumi-san's father was still doing well, he began calling famous Japanese doctors to see Kasumi-san. But one by one, none of the doctors was able to determine the cause of her slumber.

When even the doctors had run out, this time Kasumi-san's father began calling fortune tellers and witch doctors.

This time, unlike the doctors, they quickly found the cause, and would perform a ceremony if paid. However, these ceremonies seemed to have little effect. But following the theory, Kasumi-san would sleep together with snakes, foxes, and cats.

Eventually, a thinner Kasumi-san's father could do nothing but cry. Then one day, a very old priestess came for a visit.

"I had heard about the lady's illness."

Kasumi-san's father thought someone who could do nothing, like before, had come again to ask for his money, light a candle next to the sofa, and apologize as she wrote odd markings on Kasumi-san's body.

But the priestess took no money, and without touching Kasumi-san even once, began talking about the cure. Kasumi-san's father, of course, listened to the story.

The priestess' advice was simple. It was to kill her lover, basically, to cut down that cherry blossom tree.

Kasumi-san's father wanted to try this. He thought that cutting this tree down couldn't hurt Kasumi-san's condition much.

But there was an issue. Because that cherry blossom tree grew on school grounds, he couldn't simply cut it down himself.

It seems like Kasumi-san's father visited the school's principal, bent down on one knee, and begged her to cut down the tree. Because he wanted the whole thing removed, he came up to the principal and let loose all that was in his heart, without holding anything back.

His daughter was cute. If she died like this, it would be horrible. To save his daughter, even if he had to throw away everything he owned, he would have no regrets. Even if he had to give his own life up instead of Kasumi-san's.

When the school administrators were hit directly on by this show of parental affection, they allowed the cherry blossom tree to be cut down, knowing fully well that the person who had recommended it was a pagan priestess. But not because they thought Kasumi-san would be saved, but because they couldn't let Kasumi-san die without trying to help her.

But when the tree was about to be cut down, Kasumi-san opened her eyes.

Kasumi-san's father was ecstatic, and wanted to give a gift to the priestess. But, it seemed like the priestess had gone somewhere where he could not find.

Having recovered, Kasumi-san came back to school a month later, but remembered nothing odd about that cherry blossom tree.

The felled cherry blossom tree was then revived as the door for the Second Year Plum class.

When Kasumi-san would find the time, she would lean against the door.

— The Burial Among Cherry Blossoms —

Under the moonlight, the cherry blossom tree's roots were being dug. Just one person, silently. It would have been better if the hole had been bigger. But nobody knew for how long the small potting shovel that was in her hand would dig. In the middle of the night, this school was the end of the world. Like powdered snow, the petals fell. When she rested her hands and looked up, the cherry tree sported a bursting, proud sort of bloom.

It was one of those rare mornings when Yae-san came late. As she looked at the cherry trees out the window, she could see that they had not quite reached full bloom yet. Perhaps seven or eight flowers had bloomed.

“The wheels of the car caught into the ditch, and things became difficult.”

Explained Yae-san who had come to first period over thirty minutes late, to the classmates who had gathered around her desk.

“That’s horrible.”

“Were you hurt anywhere?”

The whole air of the classroom was saturated with a feeling of pity. Fujiko-san, however, with a different attitude, was the only person who viewed the real person in the middle of that circle.

“Did I look happy? Did you just ask whether I looked happy? Me?”

When at lunch, the two were alone together, and she said as much, and opened her eyes in surprise. So then Fujiko-san asked “Really?” and laughed. Fujiko-san couldn’t be beat. After eating lunch, they took a stroll towards the Church, and it came that time on their schedules to talk about secrets.

“Yes. It really was horrible, but a bit wonderful at the same time.” Yae-san confessed.

“Wonderful?”

“The kindness of the act of saving us by lifting our car out of the ditch.”

It was a guy. Fujiko felt the vibe immediately.

“Was he old?”

“I don’t know how old he really was. But, ... yeah, I wonder if he was past twenty. He had this air about him as if he was a housekeeper of some mansion.”

“And then?”

“Nothing.”

Yae-san shrugged her shoulders.

“Because the wheels were out of the ditch, the car could move. So I had to hurry on to school.”

“You had to, huh?”

Of course “Nothing” really had happened, but Yae-san thought of that boy fondly. But it wasn’t that Fujiko didn’t understand Yae-san’s feelings. When one is in trouble, and is lent a helping hand by someone else, they appear several times better than they actually are.

“Some day I’ll apologize, I thought. What his name was, what his address was, I thought I’d ask. Because he didn’t say anything and simply disappeared.”

“Did he look like a nice guy? A cool guy? Which one?”

“Hm.”

Yae-san laughed, took her comb out of her sailor uniform, and combed Fujiko’s hair. That was as far as this talk was going to get. In Yae-san’s eyes, she was viewing him as a sort of “heartthrob”.

Everyone at school was a high-class lady, so everyone had mansions, and when at school, used private cars. People of the opposite sex from out of the household came either from servants, old teachers, or your father’s friends. Excluding things such as car accidents, it is quite impossible to think of a guy as a heartthrob.

Eventually, marrying the person your parents chose for you was your fate. Because you could not wish for love like you found in books, you were cursed to not even once feel the warmth of that light upon your heart.

On the other hand, both Fujiko and Yae-san had long hair. Dark black, and straight. The kind of hair that justified the head it was on. While running the comb through Fujiko’s hair, a prank of the wind blew in cherry blossoms, and a small ring of cherry blossoms while being woven together fell to the ground.

After this, Yae-san would occasionally fall silent. Fujiko was worried about just what had happened, but she herself would not ask. If the time came when Yae-san wanted to talk about it, she would. She had heard that Yae-san’s father had fallen from his former glory, but other than that, she had heard nothing.

“Fujiko-san, what should I do?”

Yae-san asked reluctantly on a road they often walk together on.

“It seems like I’ve fallen in love.”

“Fallen in love?!”

She had thought that whatever Yae-san was brooding about that it was about her family, but she never thought to wonder how Fujiko-san’s heart was feeling.

“It’s the man who helped lift my car out of the ditch. As I was heading to sewing class, I met him all of a sudden. And then.”

The way Yae-san had talked, it sounded as if she met with the man every day. Using excuses such as flower practice or tea practice, she would go to see the young servant boy each day, and stop to talk with him.

“What should you do? There’s nothing to do.”

The moment Yae-san had said the word “love”, she felt uneasy. Without knowing why, Fujiko herself had become inflamed. So the words she finally found and offered to Yae-san were forced and unnatural.

“Yae-san. Don’t you have a fiancé? Have you decided what to do with him, once you finish high school?”

“He’s just the person my parents picked.”

“So Yae-san, if you understand this, would you be willing to exchange engagement gifts with him?”

“That’s...” Yae-san exclaimed breathlessly. “You just don’t understand what it means to be in love. If you did, you could.” In the middle of her friend, Yae-san found herself meeting the face a girl she did not know. She shivered.

“Well Yae-san, what sort of answer are you looking for from me then? Do you want me to tell you to break your current plans and go your new way just to be happy? Would you feel satisfied if I said that?”

“Don’t talk like that. It’s just, I, don’t know what to do. I don’t know, so I wanted to ask.”

Yae-san squatted in place and covered her face. While standing, Fujiko found fallen cherry blossom petals on her friend’s hair.

“If I go now, you can still make it on time. No-one will notice, right?”

So please, don’t get involved with that guy.

That advice was the only thing this person who did not know what love really is could say.

“I see.”

Yae-san said and rose, then began walking slowly.

Yae-san had said, “I see”. For some reason, Fujiko couldn’t get herself to ask more about it.

That night. A phone call came from Yae-san’s mother. In the evening, Yae-san had run away from home, going in an unknown direction. If Yae-san came to visit, Fujiko was instructed to keep her there and to contact her mother. That was all. She quickly closed the conversation. Perhaps, she’d be talking with another classmate next time.

If this was something big, then Yae-san would have known about something funny from school, Fujiko thought as she placed down the phone receiver. Then, Fujiko remembered. It was something she couldn’t help but notice about Yae-san at school. Perhaps the situation was more pressing than she had thought it to be then.

So would Yae-san finally end up running away to the house of a classmate who rejected her parents?

No. If Yae-san were feeling just as she was from the afternoon, she wouldn't come to rely on me. When Fujiko returned to her room for lessons, she opened her textbook, but she couldn't let her thoughts of Yae-san go. The faces she had made to Yae-san during lunch made her clench her fist tightly.

But now, what in the world could anyone do for her? The fact that she had taken this path filled her with regret. Even if Fujiko could not cheer her on, there were other paths for Yae-san.

“Thunk”

From the window, a small sound rang out.

“Yae-san?!”

Fujiko-san came up to the window. So as to not alert anyone else in the house, she opened the window slightly, and finally, the figure of Yae-san's body resolved itself.

“Thank god Fujiko-san's room is on the first floor.”

Because Fujiko's house was close to school, Yae-san had come here countless times to play.

“Well, earlier, your house...”

“Yeah”

Yae-san had cut her long hair, making her seem like a boy. No, not just her hair. Even the clothes she wore were mens'. This way, if anyone ran into Yae-san, they wouldn't be able to recognize her. She really looked like a boy.

“What I said during lunch....?”

Fujiko-san said, to which Yae-san shook her head with a “No” in response.

“It's not because of Fujiko-san. My dad found out. That's all.”

“Your dad....”

That was the worst possible situation. But perhaps she could use that as some unexpected leverage.

“If your father found out, how about you explain to him why? Perhaps if you make him feel as if things became so unbearable that you had no choice but to leave, then your father would do something.”

But Yae-san replied “That won’t work.”

“At home, see. My dad has been having a hard time at work, and he’s incurred a lot of debt. So he thought, perhaps he could speed up my wedding.”

The family of Yae-san’s fiancé were managers for a bank and a convenience store. It was said that they were working together with Yae-san’s father’s company to build up assets again.

“So then, for the company, Yae-san would have to.....”

“I wonder if I would be able to help out any of his employees if I marry, was the only thing I could think about.”

But she could not.

“Is it because he knew of your love?”

Fujiko asked. Yae-san opened her eyes in slight surprise, and laughed back “Yes, that’s why.”

“I love that man enough to abandon my parents. He too is willing to throw everything and run away with me.”

It was the oft-heard clichéd line. But to think she’d hear it uttered in real life by Yae-san was something else.

“But didn’t you come to me to get rescued?”

“I came to say goodbye.”

“Yae-san came, huh? So like a tale I could talk about when I became an adult?”

“Exactly.”

Yae-san laughed a little.

“Yes that. Fujiko-san will probably think of me and talk about me all the time. But I wouldn’t be able to come to see you. Because we can’t meet again.”

When she whispered this, tears began coming out of Fujiko’s eyes.

“Don’t cry.”

Yae-san said, and placed her wooden comb in the palm of Fujiko-san’s hand.

“I give this to you then. Because my hair has become short.”

It felt like receiving a souvenir.

“No, I can’t. That’s.”

Fujiko hugged her friend across the window.

“Don’t go.”

Because it was immoral, or perhaps because she was shirking her duty. Maybe using those reasons, Fujiko could get Yae-san to stay. They could not meet each other again. The person she treasured so much would disappear from her life. It was an unbearable thing to ask.

“Thank you”

Yae-san patted Fujiko’s back, as if to soothe her.

“Please. Don’t go. Stay here, with me.”

But she knew she could not change Yae-san’s feelings. Fujiko of all people knew this well.

What should she do. At this rate, Yae-san would leave.

Should she wrap herself around Yae-san’s neck and constrict her breath? Then Yae-san couldn’t go anywhere. If she couldn’t meet her again then. How would it be different from dying?

“Yae-san.”

Fujiko-san folded her arms and huddled around Yae-san. While they were embracing each other, Yae-san could not even begin to think that her friend had thought something like this.

The next day, the school was in uproar.

A student ran off with a boy. But not just that. This boy could control people’s thoughts by meeting their eyes. The girl’s fiancé had put a price on the runaway couple’s head. As the story went around, it was exaggerated further with homemade additions, until it had become a tremendous rumor.

That day, Fujiko did not go to school. She realized that there would be a big fuss at school, but her body felt heavy, and she didn’t feel like moving.

Knowing about Yae-san’s disappearance, Fujiko’s parents thought that she had received a big shock, and they let her stay at home. Around town, probably because a servant had seen her return with dirty clothes, her mother called up relatives and asked them to send over a psychiatrist.

In the middle of the night, the only reason Fujiko had gone to school was to dig a hole. But who would believe that. Why did Fujiko do this, she did not know. She had no words to express how she felt at the time. It was just that, she could do nothing else at the time. She could not let go of that last

memento of Yae-san from her hands for even a second. So she decided to nullify it. That was all.

But later, she would feel a ripple of regret course through her. At school, in order to soften and fertilize the earth around the roots of the cherry blossom trees, a teacher one day decided to dig. There, the teacher found the comb. It was confirmed. Because it was the comb that Yae-san would use commonly, the school once again fell onto the topic of Yae-san. It was said that Yae-san was eaten up by the cherry blossoms. Because the rumor was as beautiful as a phantom, it was treasured and passed around by everyone.

For a cherry blossom to grow so beautifully, just what was buried in its roots? Whatever it was, nobody knew.

“Hey, do you think Yae-san was really eaten by the cherry blossoms?”

Occasionally, Fujiko’s classmates would remember about Yae-san, and ask.

“Who knows.”

From the branch of the cherry blossom tree where the leaves would scatter, Fujiko would look up at the blue sky. Not being able to see her because she was dead, or not being able to see her in spite of her being alive, both were two very different things. But Fujiko believed that, right now, Yae-san too was looking up at the same sky.

Cherry Blossom Folk Tales - Epilogue

“‘Cherry Blossom Folk Tales’? What’s this? When is this from?”

Asked Katori-sensei as she lifted the cover with its pink-tinted cherry blossom print.

“It’s from this year. Whether you go to a cafe or not, this is interesting.”

Answered Yamamura-sensei.

It was lunch, in the Lillian Girls' Academy Staff Room.

Yotsuya-sensei, who had been sitting in the seat behind, came up next to them and laughed.

“The stories were written in about four to five weeks, right? For them to come up with such skillful stories, in such a short time....”

“It's as if they were preparing for the Olympics once every leap year. But why?”

While sitting in his chair, Yamamura-sensei began madly spinning his chair towards a spot two meters up from the floor, where there was a file cabinet with piles of books. He stuck his hand inside. Each of the books were of various length and thickness, but each piled volume had a pink outer cover. He pulled out the one at the very top of the pile, and whispered “Ah, so the last one really was four years ago.”

“This was a pile of work from every hard-working former Cherry Blossom class student and current Cherry Blossom class students. I believe these all original works made by the students themselves.”

Yotsuya-sensei shook her shoulders happily.

“Ah, of course.”

“How about Katori-sensei's time?”

Yamamura-sensei turned towards Katori-sensei and asked. Both of Katori-sensei and Yotsura-sensei had been former Lillian Academy students. He didn't mean to create any strife between them as friends, but, as a male teacher, Yamamura-sensei had no point of reference in this conversation.

“I wonder how it would have felt. There was no Cherry Blossom Class back then, so I have no memories of anything like this.”

“Actually, it's the same for me.”

Both of the former Lillian students whispered “Darn it” to themselves. It seemed as if, inside, both of them were jealous of Cherry Blossom Class.

“Really now, why is there only a second-year Cherry Blossom Class? Does someone know the answer to this?”

Yamamura-sensei asked.

“Isn’t it because the door is made from the wood of a Cherry Blossom tree?”

Said Katori-sensei. But if one were to go along with her theory, then a class with a door made of cedar would be Cedar Class. If the door was made of cypress, it would be Cypress Class, but there was no Cypress Class.

“Isn’t it because something had happened during the War?”

“You mean the saying, ‘The students would hid underneath the cherry blossom trees during the air raids, so they would not get hit by stray bullets.’ ? But the war never was that violent, so weren’t the students simply evacuated?”

Even though Yotsuya-sensei did not know the real answer, she laughed. While she was laughing, another teacher came over and asked, “What happened? Huh? Huh?”

“I’ve also heard a rumor saying that one of the school festivals had a play dealing with cherry blossoms and that was the reason for the class name. But wasn’t that the Washington Story?” Said Atsumi-sensei.

“You mean, the Tale of Fujiwara Noyoriyuji?” Corrected Sakamoto-sensei.

“The spirit who lived in that classroom was a house god called Cherry Blossom.” Explained Hoshina-sensei.

“I had heard that the words ‘Cherry Blossom Class’ had been written on the class’s nameplate by accident ...” Explained Kurata-sensei.

And so raged back and forth the argument, until it finally drew to a close.

It seemed as if no teacher in the Staff Room knew the actual reason for the name.

My my.

Yamamura-sensei placed this year's "Cherry Blossom Folk Tales" on the highest position on the shelf.

The tradition continues, and the number of folk tales continues to grow.

In Library V

$1+1+1-1+2=4$. What kind of math is that? The answer is, the number of people looking for Sachiko-sama.

Yumi and Touko-chan began, and when Minako-san participated, Touko-chan left, then Shimako-san and Noriko-san joined, which made the current 4 people.

“We’ll look in the passage, Yumi-sama, you please go look at the desk.”

“Y, yes.”

Yumi instinctively responded to Noriko-chan’s instructions, despite her being younger. Even though the library closed ten minutes ago, there were some number of students sitting around at the desks reading or studying now. At any rate, just looking around at people in the seats, she couldn’t properly confirm whether Sachiko-sama was there or not.

Even when she turned to look at the row of desks lined up near the center of the reading room, there were many people standing in the way blocking the view.

“So, Sachiko-sama is missing in action?” Yoshino-san said, in the vanguard.

“Why do you say it that way?” Rei-sama said, with a serious face.

Four plus two equals six that they’d become, which you might think is excessive.

“I met the Rosa Foetida and Yoshino-sama in front of the stature of Mary... that’s all.”

Touko-chan obviously felt that it was her duty to explain how the Rosa Foetida sisters had become involved in the situation, so she had come back to do so. And.

“It seems like something has happened.”

It was something strange, so it seemed natural that Yamaguchi Mami-san of the Newspaper club and Takeshima Tsutako of the Photography club should arrive.

“Uh, everyone.”

In total, nine people. A large search party.

“We understand what Yumi-san wants to say. There’s no one here who needs to be rescued. But, listen. We - Onee-sama and I - saw Sachiko-sama.” Unexpected words flew out of Yoshino-san’s mouth.

“Met? Where?”

“Here. In the middle of the Reading Room. She had come to return a book, and she called out to us.”

“Eh.”

At the moment, there was no difference in the new eye-witness testimony.

“Sachiko said that because she left you behind, she wanted to get back quickly. In that case, what could have happened —” Rei-sama’s expression was uneasy, and everyone fell into silence.

“If it were something like that, unless she was in a rush, Yoshino should have waited and left the Library together with Sachiko.”

“You’re blaming me? If I said my throat was dry, would you say that you would go to the cafeteria and get me juice?”

“It’s not your fault. I’m just...”

“Stop.” Tsutako-san forced her way between the soeur. “If soeur are going to fight, please do it outside.”

Coming to their senses, the Yellow Rose sisters said, “Sorry,” and shut their mouths.

“But why didn’t Sachiko-sama leave the library with the two of you, I wonder? Maybe she hadn’t finished returning the book?” Yumi asked, with obvious doubt. Why, if she kept saying that she had to return, did she remain in the reading room?

“That’s it,” Yoshino-san said, as if she had just gotten an idea. “As usual, I noticed that one book in a series that is a different color, and I called Rei-chan over to look. Sachiko-sama also seemed interested and took that opportunity to go in—”

“That book?” Yumi shot a few steps forward, as she remembered. Her goal was the Japanese classical literature corner. There was one volume with something more to it. At the School Festival, when they had presented the play “Torikaebaya,” Yumi and Yoshino-san and Shimako-san had noticed it. There was one volume in the same series that was a different color.

“...It’s not there,” she muttered, looking at the shelves.

About an hour earlier, when Yoshino-san and Rei-sama had been there, it had definitely been there, now there was space left for one volume.

“Sachiko-sama has it—?”

Manyoushuu^{*}_▬ and *Taketori Monogatari*^{*}_▬ and *Houjouki*^{*}_▬ were in their places.

Makura no Soushi^{*}_▬ wasn’t there.

In the greenhouse, Miki sees a sleeping fairy.

Admired by many classmates.

Long black hair, third-year onee-sama

Just to see her brings happiness...

At Lillian Jogakuen, a real summer event occurred.

Library Book

Really, it all happened by chance. Unwittingly treading upon the preceding visitor's steps, she went around the back of the school buildings where there was a greenhouse. There, Miki found a sleeping fairy.

Of course, the person wore the same school uniform as she, she didn't have a doubt that who this person was - it was immediately apparent that she was the third-year onee-sama that so many of her classmates admired.

It was said that she was a descendant of an old noble family. It was said that she was engaged to someone from neighboring Hanadera Academy. It was said that she had a second-year petite soeur. Miki knew much about her, if only in rumor.

But, the truth was totally, for this person, far different from the workaday world. Really, for a second, one could mistake her for a fairy. That was partially the fault of the scattered red rose petals.

Potted roses lined up on a corner stand, carelessly moved aside to make a space, watched over her sleeping breaths. Long black hair cascaded down the ledge, like a carpet hung smoothly over stairs.

It was beautiful.

Miki had forgotten her original purpose for coming to the greenhouse, so she watched the other girl for a while.

It was the beginning of July, just past lunch.

Inside the greenhouse, it was warm - there was a little sweat on the nape of her neck.

Miki's fourth period class was gym - today was swimming.

“Dash!” When gym was finished, she and Yasumi-san had decided that they would race each other to see who could get to the school building first.

After swimming, she felt a little stiff, but her body was light and bouncy; the mood as she walked with a bounce and skip, her heavy hair swinging back and forth, and the pleats of her skirt too, was like she was in a dream.

Miki suddenly felt something painful in her right eye, so she squatted down where she stood.

“What’s the matter, Miki-san?” Yasumi-san had noticed her, and come back.

“Bug.” A bug had flown into her eye. Miki dabbed her right eye with her handkerchief.

“Let me see.”

“I can’t open my eye. It hurts.”

“Maybe it would be better if you wash it with water. I’m pretty sure there’s water in there.” Yasumi-san turned her head to where the greenhouse was.

But Miki had never once gone in there. “Okay, if we’re allowed. However, Yasumi-san has to go first.”

“But...”

“I can’t go to the cafeteria. If I go there to wash my eye out, I’ll be chased out.”

Yasumi-san was today’s bread duty person, at noon she had placed the order for their class’ bread and now had to pick it up. The two had changed their clothing promptly and flew from the changing room for that reason.

“I’m sorry - I have to go.” Yasumi-san accompanied Miki to the greenhouse entrance, but from there, turned and ran off quickly, disappearing towards the main school buildings.

Classmates that had changed more slowly appeared suddenly here and there along the path.

Miki opened the greenhouse door. The atmosphere inside was warmer and more humid than the outside air. Little by little, it gave her a high feeling.

“The water spout...”

The greenhouse wasn't large; the potted trees were about Miki's height. The plant pots were set on the ledge and in corners, so that she had an unobstructed view.

Unaccustomed as she was to the place, she wavered about which way to precede, when she caught sight of her.

A sleeping fairy.

How long did she gaze at the girl?

Even though she didn't get to the water spout to wash her eye, tears spilled out, carrying the little bug with them.

Even then Miki did not move.

But the time allowed her was limited. Outside the greenhouse, she could hear the joking voices of the other girls, which finally caused the fairy to awake.

Simultaneously, she opened both eyes wide, stood and said, “What time is it now?”

Before Miki could answer, “It's 12:37,” the other girl had pulled a watch from her pocket and checked. She never seemed to see Miki, as she said “This is bad. It's already the fifth period.”

This was a little confusing, since it wasn't past one o'clock, so Miki assumed that the girl was still a little “sleepy headed”. So saying, the other girl turned and dashed off wildly.

“Um...”

Somehow, the girl managed to turn around running and return to stand in front of Miki once more.

“The exit...is that way.” Miki didn’t understand how the girl could be so awake so quickly.

Covering her embarrassment with a smile, the girl said, “You’d better hurry too. Look, it’s almost one thirty.” With those words, she left the greenhouse.

“No. It’s just 12:38,” Miki murmured. Where the girl had been asleep on the ledge just a moment ago, there lay a book.

“Is that the case?” Miki removed her wristwatch and shook it up and down. “What? It’s stopped?” Just a little while ago, when Yasumi-san had passed in front of Miki’s desk, she had taken Miki’s palm and turned it over to look. If fifth period was over, that meant that during recess, someone had tampered with the watch setting - but that was impossible, she thought.

To be sure, Miki asked Yasumi about her.

“The person I admire?”

“Look, the third year student, the one with long, smooth, black hair.”

“Ah. You mean, Sa-ko-sama?”

“S-Sa-ko-sama?” Miki has asked in return. Every time she said it, she wondered why upperclassmen at Lillian Jogakuen were called “-sama” - it was just the custom.

Yasumi-san nodded. “It’s my personal name for her, inside my heart. At any rate, it’s just a whim - when it comes to what to call them, I didn’t want to be one of the nobodies. I wanted to be different. It’s okay. The day I use her personal name will never come.” That was definitely what Yasumi-san had

said, that she called her that inside her heart, but, did she feel free to do that?

“So? Why do you want to know about Sa-ko-sama?”

“Ah. Nothing. I just wondered what class she’s in.”

“Third year, Pine group, however.... What do you mean by ‘Ah. Nothing’? You’re interested in her, huh?”

“Sorry. I met her back there in the greenhouse.”

“Met her!?” Yasumi-san turned her eyes. It looked as if a big misunderstanding was about to be born, so Miki hurriedly denied anything.

“Not really ‘met’, so much as ‘saw’.”

“Did she speak to you?”

“She asked me the time.”

“And?”

“Before I could answer, she ran out impatiently. Maybe, she had mistaken the time, I think.” She scribbled the figures 12:37 on her pad, noting that it was just past 1:30. Sa-ko-sama’s watch short hand and long hand had been extremely mistaken.

“So, Miki-san what happened?”

“I washed my eye out, then came back from the greenhouse.” And ate lunch, went to her fifth period lesson. Now, she was in front of Yasumi-san’s eyes.

“Why are you running after her?”

“Running after what? Run after, what do you mean?”

“For example...yeah. Um, what would be the best way to say this?”

Inside her heart, she desired “Sa-ko-sama”, even if Yasumi-san didn’t understand. A latecomer fan like Miki wouldn’t be ready to do anything, she’d think.

No. It was up to her. She could have left well enough alone, then. But Miki looked forward to returning the book.

It was one volume of a collection of classical Japanese literature, *The Pillow Book*. Using *The Pillow Book* as a pillow for sleeping among the plants - she almost started laughing. At that, she reflected that Sa-ko-sama was probably more accurately compared to a reborn Sei Shonagon, rather than a fairy. The book had a lovely light purple cover, exactly the kind of thing that would make a nice pillow.

I’d better return it quickly, she kept thinking as she rushed through fifth period. If she was to apologize, she’d have to learn what class the other girl was in.

But, now, she knew it was third year, Pine class.

Miki glanced at the classroom clock. It was about 7 minutes before sixth period. To make it to the third-year classrooms and back, she’d have to hurry up and get there and back in about five minutes.

“So, then...”

“Sorry, Miki-san. We’ll have to continue this conversation after I come back from the bathroom.”

“Ah, Yasumi-san.” She called after her to stop, but Yasumi’s footsteps could be heard galloping down the stairs. “I was going to try and persuade her to come with me to the Third-year, Pine class.... Oh well, I guess I’ll have to go alone.”

While it was true that the upperclassmen were the objects of the underclassmen’s admiration, they also found them frightening. When they walked in front of their classrooms, they did so in large groups, too nervous

to talk. No first-year would ever be brave enough to approach a third-year for the first time alone.

However, Miki found herself standing in front of the third-year Pine class. As she waited for Sa-ko-sama, the book clutched in her hands, little by little it grew heavier.

“Um, excuse me...” as she stood next to the door, her heart beating, a student’s voice came through.

“Yes?”

However, this nervousness made it impossible for her to address this person with whom she had no relationship, saying “what is your name?” like some reception clerk.

“First-year, Peach group, Horibe-san? I didn’t ask your name, though...” Nodding slightly, she walked down the hallway towards the stairs. There was no doubt about it, this was the upperclassman she had met in the greenhouse. The shoulder of her school uniform was dirtied with traces of something white, where she had laid on it during her nap.

“I’m sorry. It’s just, I feel we’ve met somewhere. Ummm, Horibe-san?”

“It’s Houribe. Houribe Miki.”

“Houribe? Hm, written as in ‘congratulations’? It’s a good name, with congratulations in it. Your ancestor must have been a blessed Shinto priest?”

“Yes. A long time ago, though.”

“The characters have a strange sound, but I guessed the kanji right the first time, by starting with your honorable ancestor’s occupation.” Not only was she rich and beautiful, it seemed that Sa-ko-sama had extensive knowledge.

“Then, I wonder is Miki from ‘Omiki’ ?” *

“It’s hiragana. But, it’s likely that it came from ‘Omiki.’” *

“Wonderful”

She thought back to the greenhouse for second, seeing this person from afar, and now, here she was, near that extraordinary person, and being sociable with her.

“Houribe-san. I’m terribly sorry to be an inconvenience, but I’m in a hurry, there’s something I have to do. Perhaps you could come back once again after school. I think I will be here then.”

I have to go to the bathroom, Miki thought. What she had to do wasn’t very urgent, but surely she could just hand over the book and leave quickly.

“Um, here.” Miki held out *The Pillow Book*.

“Oh,” Sa-ko-sama’s eyes sparkled. “I understand. I met you in the greenhouse.”

“That’s right.”

“Thank you. I had every intention of returning this to the library, the staff is sure to scold me when I do. I want to do something to thank you, what would be good?”

“That’s all right, I can’t think of anything.”

“Well, if you think of anything, let me know.”

Even given the opportunity, she couldn’t think of anything. Miki silently bowed her head. “Excuse me. I know there’s somewhere you have to be shortly,”

But, Sa-ko-sama just shook her head back and forth. “I was going to go to the greenhouse. But thanks to you, I don’t have to.” She smiled gently, as the sixth period chime sounded.

After all that, she missed her opportunity to talk with Yasumi-san about it. Partly, because Yasumi-san had admired Sa-ko-sama for longer than she

had, when they spoke about it, she had a sort of felt criminal. Even though she was innocent, she didn't report back.

From that day forward, Miki spent every day it seemed, in the library, perusing the circulating room. Perhaps, when Sa-ko-sama came to return the book, Miki would be able to see her. Although she was filled with anticipation, she wouldn't walk around the library. Rather, she didn't want to meet her here. Miki confirmed the exact place where *The Pillow Book* had been removed from the Japanese classical literature series. Why, she wasn't entirely sure herself.

One day, *The Pillow Book* had been returned. Immediately, Miki took the book from the shelf. Why? Some other person borrowing it would be a problem, she suddenly thought.

The library staff lent it out, it was in her own handbag and she was at peace. Now, she wouldn't have to worry about it at all. At least she didn't have to go to a bookstore to look for a paperback edition of *The Pillow Book*. It didn't matter whether or not it was the library copy of *The Pillow Book*, it was still *The Pillow Book*, but.

The final exams for the first school term were over. Tomorrow, for a little while, the students were released from exams to rest and relax.

As Miki returned from cleaning to her classroom, their footsteps echoing, Yasumi-san told her that she was very excited. "I got Rosa Foetida's autograph!"

"Ah."

They reached their classroom, and their remaining classmates surrounded Yasumi-san. Miki left and headed for the hallway towards the library. She

turned back, thunderstruck.

Yasumi-san's brand new autograph was a single page on which was written Rosa Foetida's full name and date, side-by-side, the words inscribed in magnificent characters.

"I plucked up my courage and called on her in her classroom, and said, "Please sign this." I was a little surprised but, she cheerfully signed."

What Yasumi-san was saying was, even if she asked for the popular upperclassmen's autographs at the upcoming graduation, there would be a lot more competition and the competition would be tougher, but at the end of the day as they left, the possibilities would be greater.

She was fortunate to get this autograph, by being quick, because most of them, when they are in a hurry only scribbled their names, but this one was good.

On those points, this one was without rivals, interesting to read, writing that was worth being trampled for, today she had done well. If she had been refused, tomorrow was after exam break. Rosa Foetida would surely forget a first-year's face, she reasoned.

"So, it was a good get." Yasumi-san made the peace sign with pride.

"Nice. I wonder if she would do that for me, too." Her classmates were filled with envy.

"Hang on," Miki put out a hand towards Yasumi-san. "Yasumi-san, um, Sa-ko-sama's autograph..." If there was a way to get it, she would know the right way.

"Sa-ko-sama? Ah, Sa-ko-sama is really strange to approach. Before I even tried, I figured Rosa Foetida was nice, and now my favorable impression has gone up."

"What are you saying?"

“I’m saying that, after all, I’m just one of many fans. Strong fans. It would be better to change our job to a different star. One without a soeur.”

“So what...”

“Hey, what’s with the disappointed face?”

“‘Disappointed’?”

“It’s okay. We’re friends. We can overcome any obstacle.”

“Eh?”

“Where are you going? Let’s go home together?”

“I’m sorry, I’m going to the Library. Go ahead without me.” Miki left her handbag, and left the classroom.

“Miki-san, hey. Wait up!” Yasumi-san called for her to stop, but she didn’t turn back.

What she was going to do, she didn’t really know. In any case, her first intention was to go to the library and get an extension of the loan.

It was the break after exams, and since the due date was the same day as the end of term ceremony, she wasn’t sure that she’d be able to return it by then.

She might not finish reading it, or not be able to return it on that day to the library. Not that she was saying that, only, in case, she was mistaken.

She didn’t want to go back to the classroom right away, so she walked around the outside of school buildings aimlessly.

She didn’t feel like seeing Yasumi-san. Whether the other girl would take offense, she didn’t know but, anyhow, when she was startled, Yasumi-san had a tendency to say horrible things.

She killed time wandering around, when she saw a familiar face coming around the side of a building, alone.

“Oh.”

The other person noticed her too, and stopped where she stood. She was probably coming back from school to get her book bag.

“Sa-ko-sama. Ah-” As soon as she had said it Miki muttered, “whoops” and pressed her mouth shut. Before she had even realized it, she had called her by Yasumi’s nickname.

“I like it. It’s not school. My family and relatives usually call me Sa-ko or Sa-chan. Uhhh, Houribe....so, it would be Miki-san, right?”

“Sa-ko-sama. Just now, when you said that, a vision of a pair of sake bottles popped into my head.” *
—

“You’ve got good intuition.” Sa-ko-sama smiled brightly.

Just then, in front of Mary’s statue, it looked like Sa-ko-sama’s beautiful face overlapped the Blessed Virgin’s smile.

“What are you thinking about?”

Miki told her, about the conversation with Sa-ko-sama about her giving something to Miki in thanks. “‘Make me your little sister,’ is what I’d say, but it’s hopeless.” She said it as a joke, but Sa-ko-sama wore a serious face.

“Oh. I’m sorry. Because I already have a little sister.”

“Then, may I please have your autograph?”

“Autograph?”

“On this book.”

“Book...?”

Because she had opened the paper cover, Sa-ko-sama couldn't tell what book it was.

"That's fine."

It looked like she hadn't noticed that it was the library book, Miki thought. "Here," she pointed to the inside cover of the book.

"You want me to write my name, right?" Sa-ko-sama took the book.

"Yes." Even as she answered, Miki's heart was pounding with excitement.

Now, Sa-ko-sama took the cover, no, just one page, and turned it over. There was the imprint of the library rubber stamp.

In passing, she wasn't interested in first-year student's reading, but she was moderately interested in what book she was signing.

Sa-ko-sama saw the title. She may have not wanted to see it, or she may have felt negatively when she saw it, but she said nothing. Sa-ko-sama turned one more page, then went back to the cover. From a bag, she took out a fountain pen and, in neat characters, signed her name, adding, "To Houribe Miki-san" above it, then handed it back to Miki.

"Thank you very much."

"You're welcome."

"Good-bye, Sa-ko-sama." Miki didn't say "Good day," she said, "Good bye." *

Sa-ko-sama answered "Good-bye," as well.

And, in front of Maria-sama's statue, they parted ways.

Back in her classroom, Yasumi-san was sitting in Miki's seat, reading a book. "I waited for you, just like I said."

As Miki entered, lifting her worried face, Yasumi-san gave her a small smile.

“Mm. Shall we go home?” Miki reached out to the side of her desk where she had left her book bag.

It was strange, now that she was finally face to face with Yasumi-san, the depression she had felt disappeared.

“What’s the matter? Your eyes are all red.” Yasumi-san stared intensely into her face.

“I had a bug in my eye, just a little while ago, but I’m all right now.”

“Miki-san, another bug flew into your eye - you must be the type that bugs like.”

“Hey, that’s mean,” Miki patted Yasumi-san’s shoulder with a smile. Why - she didn’t know.

So, inside Miki’s heart, it was over once and for all, but it wasn’t really over. As she went home, she became amazed at what she had done. After all, it was a school possession, a library book, that she had had defaced.

No matter how lovely the handwriting was, they were still no more than human, mere scribbles. It wasn’t any more defacing than inks stains, she rationalized.

She worried about it for a week, then bought a copy of “*The Pillow Book*,” and studied it. “If I hadn’t defaced it, I wouldn’t have bought it.” She concluded that she’d switch it with the newly purchased copy, so no one would know. The library staff might be surprised, she told herself, if Miki were to switch the books. But it would restore the series, which was the reason to do it.

Only, the new book was a revised edition and the front cover color differed a little. It wasn’t light purple, it was pink.

Miki had stepped over and stood in front of the shelf, and her heart convulsed slightly. She wouldn't forget this ever, that was sure.

One volume only, of a slightly different color.

Surely this guilt would disappear eventually. She would graduate, get married, and even have children.

"Oh?" Shimako muttered, standing in front of the Japanese classical literature shelves.

"What?" Yumi was standing a little apart, examining a different genre of books. Her interest was piqued, and she left the book she held and walked over to Shimako-san. She had come here originally to find a book to read, but there wasn't anything good.

She had been looking for a reference book on making props for the school play, but she felt very happy coming to the Library's circulating room with her good friends.

"Did you notice? Look - the color of this book, isn't it subtly different?"

"Ah, really."

Recently, Shimako-san had been on a classical Japanese boom. *

Because of that, Sachiko-sama, Yumi and Noriko-chan would point out books they had come across to Shimako-san.

But, this book was -

"Take it out."

Usually, Yoshino-san was the borrowing master.

"Borrow it and report back - what - why are you making that strange face?" Shimako-san asked and glanced again, thinking she had imagined it.

Past the writing lessons, Yoshino came around to the Japanese classical literature section with reluctance written on her face, because she had been cheerfully reading through a series of samurai novels, regrettable medieval literature. Looking like a 12-layer robe-wearing princess, not quite having the opportunity to brandish a sword.

“I haven’t borrowed that.” Just a little while ago, Shimako-san had called Yoshino-san a borrowing master.

“But. Hasn’t not only Sachiko-sama and Yumi-san, but even Noriko-chan taken this out? It’s something I don’t want to miss. If I hesitate, I wonder if Touko-chan or Kanako-chan might take it.”

“Is that so?” It was so like Yoshino-san, Yumi thought, she hated to lose. If she felt that one of her companions was wrong, she’d react quickly.

“So, what were you saying ‘really’ about?” Yoshino-san peered at the book in Shimako-san’s hands.

“The color is different. Only this one volume.”

“Ah, yes. *The Pillow Book*, I see. For some reason, only this one volume was replaced, I wonder why.”

Damage, stains, loss. Various misfortunes had befallen this book. Not to mention how many students had borrowed it over the years.

“*The Pillow Book*...hey?”

“What Yumi-san?”

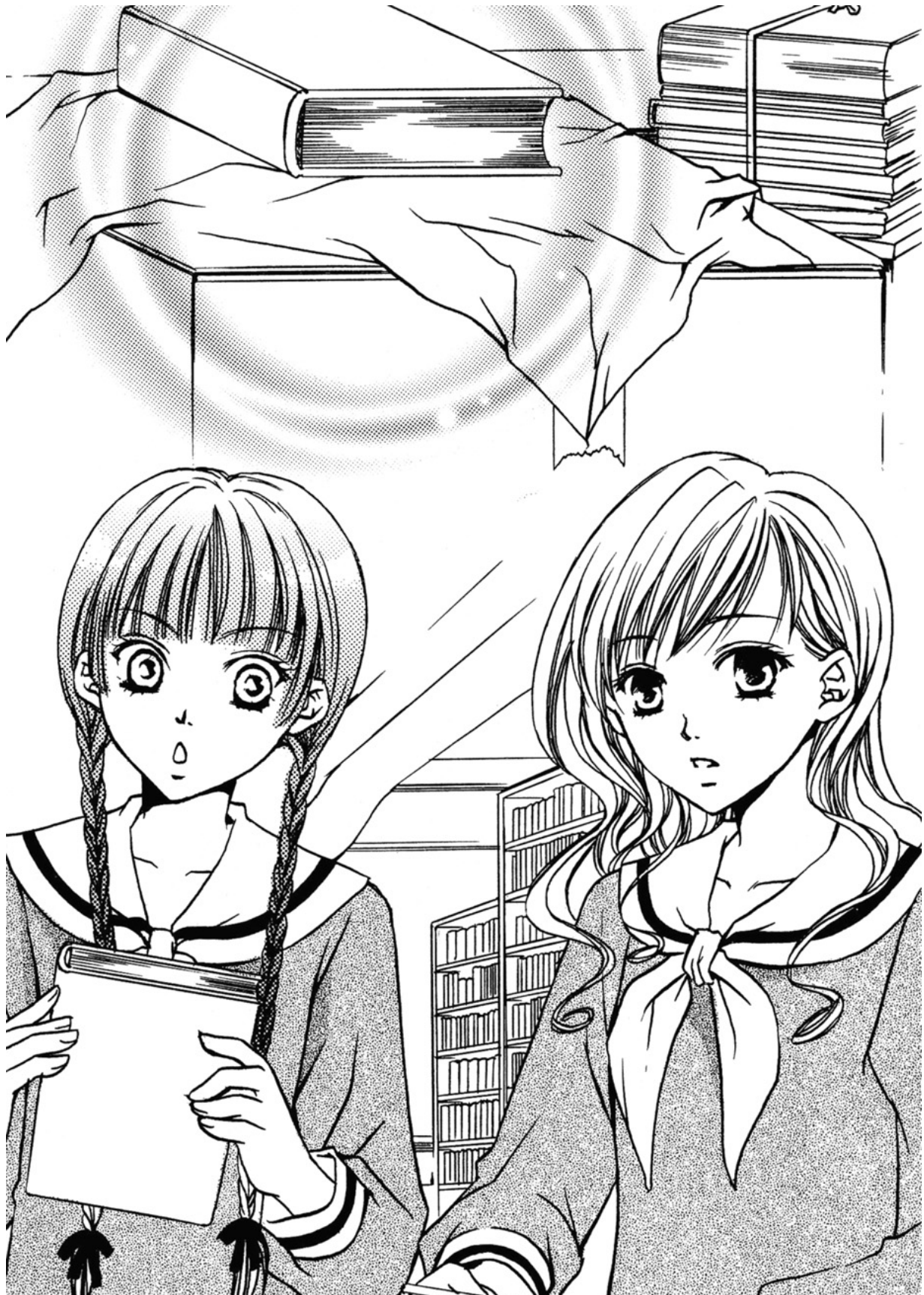
“I don’t know. I just remembered something about it.”

“What did you remember?” Shimako-san asked.

“Well. We have a copy of it at home. That book.”

“This one?” Yoshino-san looked at the book, as if for the first time.

“Mmm. *The Pillow Book*. I’m sure I found it in the closet when I went to look for something.”





“In the closet? Not on a bookshelf?”

“Mm. ‘Mother really doesn’t like classical literature’ I thought when I saw it that time, so I noticed it.”

“That does seem odd, why would she have it, if she doesn’t like it?”
Detective Yoshino quickly began the investigation.

“Oh, why would she. Ah, right. Her name is written in it. ‘To Houribe Miki-san,’ it says. Houribe is my mother’s unmarried name.”

“You say your mother’s name is Miki. Then, perhaps, your father’s name is Yuuichi, or Yuutarou?”

“...” Almost, but not quite. It is Yuuichirou. *

“If it says, ‘To Houribe Miki-san’ then it was probably a present, wasn’t it?”

“Ah, right. Yes, yes. It’s coming back to me. There’s another name written in it. Ah, Sayoko, I think. Oh, what was it. It was Chrysanthemum-something, Sayoko. Mm, Sayoko, I wonder. It’s so average.”

Since she had become acquainted with Ogasawara Sayoko, if she had seen that particular character, she would naturally read it as “Sayo.” *

“Yumi-san, you’re mother is an alumna? It’s rather surprising that she would have the original library book from here.”

She laughed at that, but inside, Yumi thought about it. About that time.

“It’s the same as Sei Shonagon’s “Sei”. Wonderful, isn’t it?” Shimako-san smiled. *

A present of *The Pillow Book* from a person of that name, she commented.

In Library — VI

“Onee-sama is in here. Absolutely!” Yumi declared with force.

“The basis for that is?” Rei inquired.

“Because that book isn’t there.”

“If Sachiko took that book out, that doesn’t mean she’s here.”

“Onee-sama didn’t borrow any books. She didn’t go through the formal lending process, so she wouldn’t take the book out.”

“So then, she took it somewhere inside her to read, huh. However, there’s always the possibility that someone other than Sachiko borrowed it.”

“If that was the case, she would surely have returned to the Rosa Mansion already. If Onee-sama came here after someone else had borrowed it, she would have given up and returned; if after Onee-sama had come here, someone else borrowed it, Onee-sama would have accomplished what she set out to do anyway. There’s no reason to think that she doesn’t have the book.”

“I see. So you’re saying that, once she was satisfied that this volume alone was a different color, she took the book and moved somewhere where she became absorbed by it?”

Yumi nodded.

“But, Yumi-san was waiting.”

“Don’t say that, Shimako-san. Maybe the book was an apparition.”

She thought she’d just read a page and couldn’t stop. Such an avid reader as Sachiko, who always carried a book, wouldn’t think anything of it.

“Anyway, she’s absolutely here.”

Because the younger sister declared it, the group who was going outside the Library for another search turned back, and looked with excessive concentration around the reading room.

Sachiko-sama was found, not long after. The spot where she was discovered was in the Reading Room, as Yumi had inferred.

Once they heard the news that she had been detected, everyone came running where, upon seeing the situation, they all said the same thing.

“I don’t believe it...”

Sachiko-sama, who had had taken a seat at the examination table, was laying with her head across the seat next to her. For a moment, she was worried that she wasn’t feeling well, but then she could see that she was breathing regularly in sleep, with a happy face as she slept, which told her that it was just a nap.

“She wanted to look at properly, but was too tired, after all, huh.”

“I looks more like she was sitting and got dizzy and fell than that she feel asleep. Her feet are on the floor.”

“It seems as if she became exhausted early on. It’s open to the Table of Contents page.”

Everyone commented, looking around as they pleased. There was a feeling that everyone was enjoying it, since they never got to see Sachiko-sama like this.

“Everyone, please pardon us.”

Protecting Onee-sama who had become an exhibition, Yumi moved in to block everyone’s view, spreading her arms and legs to impede everyone’s sight.

“Ah, Yumi-san you’ll have to wake her up, sorry.”

“Me?”

“Other than you, who would wake her? The building’s closing, you’ll have to hurry up.”

So designated, she undertook the task of waking up Ogasawara Sachiko, although it was awful.

“Well, then, although it’s presumptuous,” clearing her throat slightly, she laid her hand on a shoulder. “Onee-sama.”

“U...hn.”

“Please wake up.” Yumi shook the shoulder.

Just then Sachiko’s dazzling eyes opened, and she muttered. “...How strange.”

“Huh?”

“Just now, I was just waking Yumi up.”

Sachiko-sama said as if she was wondering when they switched places. She was still a little sleepy headed. She looked as if she didn’t know where she was.

Inside the Library.

After Sachiko stretched, she looked around her. And.

“Ah, what on earth is going on?” She laughed when she looked at all the faces lined up behind Yumi. “You all look like big turnips.”

Right.

The End.

Translator's Notes

1. ↑ (E: In Buddhism, as well as many other belief systems, regrets or unfinished business tie a spirit to this world.)
2. ↑ (E: Soumen are wheat flour noodles. In spring, especially for Girl's Day, you can find them colored white pink and green.)
3. ↑ (E: Strokes and stops are part of radicals in Kanji.)
4. ↑ (E: Touko is referring to herself in third-person here. She does this throughout.)
5. ↑ (E: "Futamata" which is the word used for two-timing also means a "fork in the road.")
6. ↑ (E: This word is "masumi," written in hiragana, not in the Kanji for Masumi's name.)